

AFTER THIRTY

JULIAN STREET

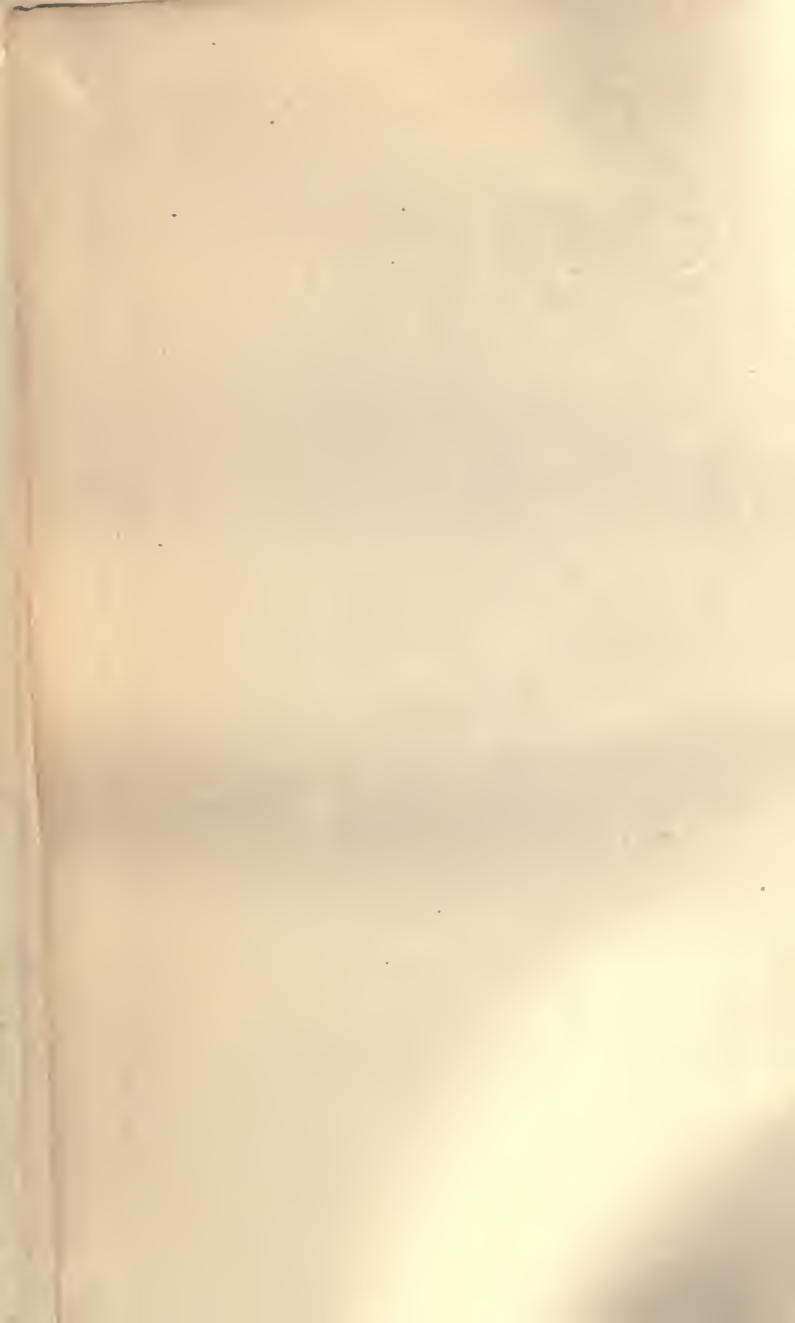




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AFTER THIRTY

BOOKS BY JULIAN STREET

ABROAD AT HOME

AMERICAN ADVENTURES

THE NEED OF CHANGE

THE MOST INTERESTING AMERICAN
(A close range study of Theodore
Roosevelt)

PARIS À LA CARTE

SHIP-BORED

WELCOME TO OUR CITY

THE GOLDFISH
(For children)



"My wife is coming home"

AFTER THIRTY

BY
JULIAN STREET

AUTHOR OF "ABROAD AT HOME," "AMERICAN
ADVENTURES," "THE NEED OF
CHANGE," etc.



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CHAPTER I

THE RAPIDS OF ROMANCE

NO matter what the first girl's name was. Enough that she was very round and very pink, that her bathing-cap was blue with black Valkyrie wings at either side, and that, from the hour of her arrival at the Seaview Inn, Shelley Wickett perceived a new romantic beauty in the coast of Maine. Every afternoon they strolled out to the point and watched the surf come smashing in upon the rocks; every evening at the club they danced his collar to limpness; every morning they played tennis; every midday they swam and splattered in the sea. Within a week they ceased to talk of people and hotels and clothes and things to eat, and got along to Venice and the stars and the feeling of "having known each other always." Then, one day, just to show how deep and true her

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friendship for him had become, the girl came up behind him in the surf and ducked him.

Purposely, upon the following day, he reached the beach a little late, and as he loped down the stretch of burning sand his eyes searched the margin of the sea for the familiar wingèd bathing-cap. And presently, amid the swirling suds just inside the breaker-line, he sighted it. The girl's back was toward him. He hurried into the water, and, coming within reach of her just as a great green roller toppled over, pressed a hand upon her damp, delightful neck.

Her head went under for an instant. She came up a disheveled mermaid, blowing, dripping, angry. And she had a right to be angry, for she had never seen Wickett before.

He was horror-stricken. His face crimsoned beneath its tan, and the crimson oozed down into his neck and disappeared beneath his bathing-suit. He tried to tell the story of the other girl and the other ducking and the other wingèd cap, and because he was so ashamed, and because his blurted apologies were so pathetic, and because he was so amazingly good-looking, her heart softened toward him. She forgave him. And when she actually laughed

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across red lips and small white teeth, he forgot the other girl forever and became Molly's bondsman.

That was her name — Molly. She had another name, but — oh! her complexion was like a bunch of pink and white sweet-peas, and her eyes were like a pair of cornflowers, and her ways were baffling beyond belief. You never knew what she was thinking, or what she was going to say. She was Mystery personified. Even when Wickett asked her to become his wife he did n't know what she was going to say — though *she* did. So in about a year they went to a big stone church which was full of flowers and friends, and with faithful Archie Higgins helping, as best man, stood up before a minister who could intone the sense out of any service, and were married. And, being in the middle twenties, they continued, for several years thereafter, to seize every opportunity to tell about their romantic meeting in the surf.

Their first baby was called Shelley and their second was called Molly, and both children gurgled, and looked at their hands and feet, and teethed, and proved so generally engrossing that their parents had not time to tell the story of the ducking so often as formerly they had. Even when they did occa-

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sionally recall it, the episode seemed vague and unreal, like a dream, or an anecdote about a boy and girl they had known long, long ago. The world had changed. It had become a parents' and children's world — happy, but lacking the rainbow brilliance with which their lovers' world had shone. For it is a truth (an annoying truth, which people will dispute as they dispute any truth unpleasing to them) that children, however they may bind their parents together with ties of mutual interest and affection, are among the strongest agencies for the destruction of young dreams.

Far up among the radiant mountain-peaks of Youth bubbles the spring of Curiosity, which, trickling downward, runs into the Rapids of Romance. Your couple, embarking in the matrimonial canoe, shoot these rapids, and are but vaguely conscious of the glory of the scenery that flashes by on either bank. Presently they come to the first cataract — the birth of their first child — a long hard portage, with the larger portion of the burden on the wife. After that there may be other rapids, but they never rush so swiftly. With each succeeding cataract the stream grows calmer, until Romance has been left far behind and the matrimonial craft

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(if it has not capsized) floats placidly upon the sweet, slow-flowing River of Affection.

It was on this peaceful tide that Wickett found himself drifting after something less than half a dozen years of married life. Devoted to his wife and children, successful in business, comfortable in his New York apartment from October to June, and his pleasant country home, beside the golf links, from June to October, he had, according to the standards by which claims upon contentment are usually measured, every reason to be satisfied with life.

Yet, curiously, as time passed, he found himself often dreaming of the hills and rapids left behind, mourning the tingling vividness which seemed to have departed out of life, tiring of the changeless pastoral panoramas of settled domesticity, made restless by the monotonous certainty that he was able to foresee, in every detail, the landscape lying beyond each bend, ahead. And the more he thought he knew what lay ahead, the more his longing eyes looked back.

Molly seemed to have changed. She was as beautiful as ever, indeed more beautiful in her still youthful maturity; and when, now and then, they

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settled down to a discussion of some subject holding strong interest for them both, she would show him flashes of the keen insight, the sane philosophy, the quick, gentle humor which, from the first, he had adored in her. But the trouble was, they did n't fall into interesting conversations, now, so often as they used to. The interesting things, the charming things, the stimulating abstractions which used so often to engage their thoughts, were being pushed aside, more and more, by the matter-of-fact details of every-day life.

Could it be, he wondered, that Molly failed to observe this gradual change? Or, if she did observe it, was she indifferent — would she be content to drift and doze through life, sunned by her domesticity and motherhood? Now and then he made an effort to arouse her, to speed up the matrimonial craft, but though sometimes she responded to his call, too often she did not. Too often it seemed that the canoe in which they had begun their cruise together was turning into a canal-boat, heavy laden with life's commonplaces.

From the deck of such a vessel one has leisure in which to look about. Wickett's eyes began to rove

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a little. And then, for the first time since the commencement of their voyage, he noticed that a handkerchief was being fluttered at him, as in flirtatious signal from the shore.

CHAPTER II

MRS. RAILEY

HE met Mrs. Railey at a dinner party. She was picturesque: a slender figure with fair skin and very black hair; and her robe of black velvet — fabric most admired by men — suggested to Wickett a jewel casket, encasing yet displaying its gem.

As he entered the drawing-room with Molly he saw her standing with one arm resting on the shelf of a Caen stone mantelpiece. Where the stone was contrasted with the dark, gracious silhouette of her costume it looked almost white, but where contrasted with the ivory of her arm, it became a dull, lifeless gray.

His hostess led him over and presented him, and he managed to pause near her, for there was about her a fascinating suggestion of underlying volatility, cloaked by exterior repose. He hoped violently that he would be placed at her side at dinner, and

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somewhat to his own amazement presently found himself telling her so.

At that she smiled and called him surprising.

"It's the simple truth," he said.

"But surely you don't think you can go around telling the truth, indiscriminately?"

"I'm fond of it," he said, "but I don't habitually use it to excess."

Amber-colored cocktails and soft little caviar sandwiches floated to them on silver trays.

"The amount one can stand," Mrs. Railey replied over her cocktail, "depends, I suppose, on the amount to which one is accustomed—I am still speaking of truth."

"I flatter myself," he returned, "that I always carry mine like a gentleman. But as I've said, I'm not really addicted to it."

"It's not so much the taste you enjoy, then," she suggested, "as the after effects?"

"Yes, the stimulation. For a man and woman to sit and tell each other the truth for an evening might be a real adventure."

"And you're fond of adventure?"

"No less than you are."

"What makes you think that I am?"

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"Your eyes."

"What about my eyes?" she asked, letting him look straight into them.

"They're exciting."

"I hope we'll sit together at dinner, too," she said. "I want to hear more about myself."

"We'll have an orgy of truth," he proposed.

Dinner was announced. As the company moved toward the dining-room Wickett followed Mrs. Railey as closely as her train permitted. Yes! there at the right of her place was a card bearing his name.

"An answer to a prayer!" he murmured over her shoulder, as he seated her.

"Let's talk to the others a little, first," she said in a low tone, as a maid placed oysters before them. "Then we can come back." With that she turned to the gentleman upon her left; and Wickett, after gazing disconsolately, for a moment, at the hair ornament anchored like a raft in the black waves at the back of her head, had no alternative but to shift to the lady on his right.

Ten years earlier she had been a beauty; now she was a bust. Her bosom, revealed in generous décolletage, had the gradual slope of a bookkeeper's

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desk. While they talked of Palm Beach, whither she had recently returned, Wickett kept watch from the corner of one eye for Mrs. Railey, and when, after a time, she turned ever so slightly toward him, he was there to meet her.

"Welcome home!" he said.

And she answered: "It's nice to get back."

"Your husband and my wife seem to be getting on famously, too," he said, after a glance across the table. "I heard them talking about salt marsh grass as a winter covering for rose bushes. He's fond of country life, I take it."

"Yes — and she?"

"Oh, yes. The city rather tires her, whereas it keys me up."

"I know," she said, nodding in agreement. Then: "But they're just the sort for people like you and me to marry; are n't they?"

"Yes. You and I are wonderfully congenial as we are now — at a dinner. But you mean that — that —" He paused, smiling.

"That we should probably fight ——"

Then, as she hesitated, he finished for her:

"If we were married."

"Precisely," she said, her cheeks flushing a little.

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"People speak of 'double harness,' but marriage is n't double harness. It's a tandem. There's a leader to prance and shy, and a wheeler to do the steady pulling and keep the cart in the middle of the road. I'm afraid the leaders, left to themselves, might ditch it."

"Yes," he said with a long breath that was almost a sigh. "I sometimes wish I were the other kind — don't you?"

"Oh, yes, of course I do, sometimes," she admitted with a crooked little smile, "but then again I can't deny I love to prance. And I'll be sorry when prancing days are over. Won't you? Time is the whip. When I think of Time I want to lay back my ears and bite and kick at him." Then, as though by way of explanation, she added with a frankness that amazed and charmed him: "You see, I'm thirty."

She might have said twenty-six or twenty-seven; he would have believed her. But thirty! The frank avowal with its ring of truth challenged his admiration so completely that the very thought of an obvious pretty answer was offensive. Still, thirty is no great age; he felt it his duty as a temporary truth-teller to insist upon the point; and the

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vehemence with which he did so was in no wise diminished by the recollection that his wife had told him, earlier in the evening, that his hair was beginning to thin out just a trifle at the temples.

When Mrs. Railey did not prove an easy convert, he insisted further. Had they been alone, he might have deemed it fitting to temper somewhat the expression of his admiration; but, being tête-à-tête with her in the imperfect seclusion of a large dinner-party, he felt at liberty to be outspoken, so long as no one overheard.

Whispered to a young girl in a moonlit garden, the things he said might have made the opening to a matrimonial overture; set forth here in the rigidity of type they might suggest a prelude to scandal; but spoken in the place and manner that they were, and in a tone that strove, with more or less success, for an effect of cold, truthful analysis, they amounted only to very definite assurances, from a very sanguine and admiring man, that in Mrs. Railey's case, certain painful penalties imposed by Time were to be rendered null and void.

Oddly, perhaps, the news that she was to be the beneficiary of unprecedented natural phenomena left the lady unmoved.

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“ Ah, but you ’re a man,” she said ; then added :
“ I ’ve been looking in my glass to-day.”

Wickett’s imagination balked at the idea that a mirror could give such a woman aught but satisfaction. How amazed he would have been, could he have seen her as she sat, that afternoon, before the triple mirrors of her dressing-table, lips compressed, a look of cold appraisal in her eyes. She was balancing her account with youth — admitting certain items on the debit side which had, as yet, been overlooked by all save herself and her masseuse. Even Fred, her husband, had been surprised when, on coming home from business, he had found her there and learned her thoughts — some of them. He had laughed and told her that her fancies were absurd. And now, only a few hours later, here was another man caressing her with his gaze and saying the self-same thing.

Ah, if she could but believe them ! But no. She knew. There were microscopic wrinkles beneath her eyes — wrinkles made by laughter. So even happiness takes toll of us ! Nor were those little wrinkles all. An infinitesimal fullness began to show beneath her chin. As she thought of it now, she threw her head back a trifle, and Wickett, far

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from comprehending the reason for the action, admired the spirited pose.

Did their truth-telling compact cause her to tell him of the little wrinkles and the little fullness? No. She had n't even told Fred. However, she placated the little god of Truth by particularizing, now to Wickett, on certain inward evidences of decline — as, for instance, that she had caught herself, of late, reflecting gravely upon domestic matters of the least importance; that she had yawned several times during the last act of the new Shaw play and, as though that were not bad enough, had wanted to go home, when the curtain fell, instead of chiming in with Fred's idea to sup among the gay and gilded.

Wickett declared it was the weather.

"No," she insisted. "It is to be the truth to-night, remember. And the truth is that I'm past the age of thrills."

He was shocked. Again he argued. And when a man attempts to convince the most recent most-fascinating-woman-he-has-ever-met that she is not past the age of thrills, the argument itself has thrilling possibilities. As he enlarged upon his theme he became almost indiscreet. Mrs. Railey did not ob-

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ject to that, however; on the contrary, she liked him to be indiscreet; it stimulated her. And he liked to be indiscreet; it stimulated him. Thus one thing led quite naturally to another — as one thing has a tricky way of doing — and before he knew it, and without quite knowing how he ever got so far, Wickett found himself plunged into a rash proposal.

So long as Wickett and Mrs. Railey were there together, the project charmed them both. Even after the ladies left the dining-room, and the men moved into close formation at one end of the table, with their liqueur-glasses before them and a canopy of smoke weaving above their heads, Wickett continued to glow with the mild adventure and its promise.

Later, in the drawing-room, he had no chance to speak with her; nor, in truth, did he wish to, for he felt that their responsiveness had been strange and very perfect, and that there was nothing left to say. Enough that their eyes met, now and then, with significant percussion, and that they exchanged deep, meaning glances when they said good night.

Not until he slipped into his overcoat, and stood waiting in the hall for Molly, did Wickett have a

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chance for independent thinking. When his wife came, in her wrap of fur-trimmed velvet, she found him with a frown upon his face. But even wifely wisdom saw in the frown only the usual masculine impatience.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, dear," she said. "These carriage-boots ——"

"Oh, that's all right," he answered, coming out of his abstraction. Then she felt that there must be something on his mind.

In the motor, going home, he was preoccupied. Later he came into her room and offered to unhook her gown. While he was doing so she began taking down her hair; and, even though she moved about a little in the process, he uttered no complaint. This time wifely wisdom did not err: Surely he was conscience-stricken about something.

His task accomplished, he passed into his room, and she slipped out of her dress. Through the open door she heard him moving about. Presently he appeared again, in his dressing-gown, and leaning against the door-jamb, looked at her without speaking. But she only went on braiding her hair, and waited.

"Dearest," he said at last.

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"Yes?" she replied, without prejudice.

"I am afraid I have done something awfully foolish."

"Have you?" She looked at the glass in order that he might not see her smile. Contrition always made him look so funny.

"Yes. I'd rather tell you now, if you don't mind, before I go to sleep."

Now she let him see her smile.

"Did you find her so attractive then?" she led.

"Then you noticed?" he said, grinning shamefacedly.

"Yes; I sat by her husband."

"He's nice, too, is n't he?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered."

"And Mrs. Railey — what have you asked her to do — fly with you to Venice?"

"Molly!" he reproached.

"What, then?"

"First," he declared solemnly, "I want to assure you that she is a perfectly fine woman, and all that. But, you see, she's thirty."

"She's *thirty*?"

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"Yes, and she has the idea that ——"

"But how do you know she's thirty?"

"She told me. We got to telling the absolute truth about things, just as a sort of amusing stunt, and ——"

"You *did* get on!"

"Yes," said he; "I was trying to make you understand that."

"Well, you have."

"She seemed blue," he continued, "—talked of the way people lost interest in things after thirty — said there were n't any more thrills to be had out of life, and ——"

"Never mind the beginning," Molly put in. "What's the end?"

Wickett swallowed.

"She's going to lunch with me to-morrow — alone," he confessed.

"Well?"

"The fact is," he rushed on ruefully, "we were n't to mention it to any one — not even to you or her husband. I suggested the whole thing. It's all my fault. I don't know what put the crazy idea in my head, or how I came to propose it. We were

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talking of adventure. Well, anyhow — there you are! What on earth shall I do? I don't want to go."

"But if you did n't want to, why did you ask her?"

"I don't know. It was just a wild impulse. How am I going to get out of it, Molly?"

"You can't. You've invited her. The only thing to do, now, is to go through with it."

"Even though I don't want to?"

"Certainly."

"I thought maybe you could help me," he said, forlornly.

"How can I help you? Did n't you get yourself into it? What can you expect me to do, then?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought you might think of something.

In reply she only shook her head sternly.

He sighed.

"I'm glad you told me, though," she said.

"Of course I told you!" he replied, virtuously.

"You agreed not to."

"I know; but when I came to my senses, I saw that it was the only thing to do. It is n't square to her, of course. She won't tell her husband. Either

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way you look at it, I don't cut a very pretty figure."

"She'll never know you told," said Molly.
"Your guilty secret is safe with me!"

He smiled a relieved smile.

"Molly," he said with feeling, "you're a brick! I knew you were one woman in a million, but I did n't do you justice — I did n't think you'd take this so splendidly. I — I almost wish you minded more."

"Oh, well," she said, smiling back at him, "you have n't done anything desperate in a long time. Probably she has n't, either. You had better go to bed now. You'll need your beauty sleep."

With his conscience cleared by confession, Shelley Wickett retired to prompt and peaceful slumber; but before she went to bed that night Molly looked for a long, long time into her mirror.

CHAPTER III

AT THE OLD CAFÉ MARTIN

THE name Martin — pronounced in the French manner — though no longer attached to any New York restaurant, is still remembered as a famous one in the annals of metropolitan gastronomy. It first came into prominence in connection with a French hotel and café that occupied the old white-painted brick buildings at the corner of Ninth Street and University Place, now known as the Hotel Lafayette. When Jean Baptiste Martin, the former proprietor, thought best to follow the general trend of business toward the region of uptown, he succeeded to the historic building, in Madison Square, left vacant by Delmonico's when that famous restaurant moved up to Forty-fourth Street. Louis Martin, a brother of J. B., also became engaged for a time in the business of providing sustenance, running a large and sybaritic establish-

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ment on Broadway, near Forty-second Street. Thus at the time of Wickett's indiscretion, there existed two restaurants called Martin's, and a third that had formerly been called by the same name. When deserted by the original Martin, the latter establishment was taken over by two erstwhile head waiters, who have, to this day, preserved it unchanged — the most truly French of all New York cafés. It is not all marble and fresh paint; and, if it is a little bit out of the way, that is so much the better. Climbing over its old bricks is a wistaria vine with a trunk as big as the body of a boy. Within, the floors creak, pleasantly, beneath their carpets. Old Frenchmen sip *sirops*, play dominoes, or read the *Journal Illustré* in the café proper, while in the main dining-room you will find gathered, for luncheon or dinner, a unique conglomeration of types: merchants from the wholesale clothing, feather, and artificial flower houses of the region; painters, sculptors, and illustrators from McDougal Alley, Washington Mews, Washington Square South, Greenwich Village, and other neighboring studio centers; editors from Spring or West Thirteenth streets; writers from heaven knows where, eating at the editors' expense; and always a sprink-

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ling of "foreigners"—people from uptown, who desire, for various reasons which we shall not too closely inspect, to meet and eat in an out-of-the-way place.

As with a widow who remarries, the Café Lafayette found it difficult, at first, to teach its new name to its old friends—the more so since the change of name and proprietors has brought no alteration in appearance. And so it happened that many of those who knew the place in its old days, continued to refer to it as "the old Martin's."

Wickett was one of these, and it was at this mellow old establishment that he had arranged his rendezvous with the lady of the night before.

He was there ahead of time. After a tour of the several waiting-rooms, he went to the restaurant, reserved a table, and spent some minutes in the selection of a lyric luncheon. Then he repaired to the larger waiting-room, and took a chair commanding a view of the street door. The door was continually opening and shutting, and every time it opened Wickett looked. He saw all kinds of people enter, singly and in groups. Some went directly to the café or the dining-room; others sat down and waited. One o'clock came. He found himself re-

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flecting, with mild amusement, that where husband and wife were not concerned, the man was sure to be early, the woman sure to be late.

The street door was almost constantly in motion; the restaurant was filling up. At a quarter-past-one Wickett began to feel uneasy. Others who had waited met their friends and went to table. A memory of long ago returned to him. He had waited, that way, for another woman, years before; waited, waited, waited. The picture of her flashed into his mind. He had not thought of her in ages. He remembered the way she had of looking up at him beneath her lashes; it used to give him palpitations of the heart. Where was she now? he wondered. Who was waiting for her? . . .

The clock struck. It was half past one. He arose, walked up and down the room, took up a French railroad pamphlet, and sat down again. Hang it! He was not in love—that is, not with Mrs. Railey. Why should he be nervous? Suppose she did not come? What of it?

“But Molly knows!” He answered his own question. If Mrs. Railey failed him, if she had forgotten, or thought better of the matter, Mollie would have to know that, too. He would have to own up.

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She would laugh at him. Yes, and she would have a right to laugh.

Feeling himself growing warm, he fanned himself vigorously with the pamphlet. Then, throwing it down, he arose and made another circuit of the waiting-rooms. Three quarters of an hour! Yet there was nothing for it but to wait. He returned to his chair.

The noise of service and of conversation was wafted from the dining-room, along with palate-tempting odors. Save for one other man, who had come in late, he was alone in the anteroom. His companion was an old Frenchman with white hair and beard, and humorous dark eyes framed in a patchwork of wrinkles. Placid and observant, he waited philosophically for some one, and watching Wickett, who was so plainly eager and impatient, he remembered episodes of his own youth, and was inwardly amused.

"Ah, my old one!" The gentleman rose suddenly and shook both hands of another Frenchman who had entered. Linking arms, they passed into the restaurant, leaving Wickett alone in his discomfiture.

Judgment, assisted by vanity, told him that there

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had been some mistake. He would not think that she had disappointed him deliberately. Could she have gone to Martin's, or to Louis Martin's? Possibly. But it would not do to telephone to those establishments and have her name howled through the rooms by pages. He did not wish, either, to call up her house, but after deliberation he concluded that to be the only course left open to him.

The maid who answered the telephone informed him that her mistress had gone out to luncheon. That was something.

"Where?" he demanded.

"She did not say, sir."

"When Mrs. Railey returns," he instructed, "please ask her to call up Gramercy 6840." Then quickly, before she could ask his name, he hung up the receiver. He did not like such tactics, but did not wish to risk embarrassing the lady.

Another half hour dragged itself through the lagging clock. He was becoming very hungry. Those whom he had seen go in were now emerging from the dining-room; there was a pleasant odor of post-prandial cigar smoke on the air. He took to pacing the hall, stopping now and then at the telephone switchboard, to ask if any one had called him.

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At length he grew ashamed to ask again. In order to relieve the tension on his nerves he tried to concentrate on concrete things: the few French posters hanging on the walls; the geometrical pattern of the floor-covering, by which he could regulate the length of his steps. After promenading back and forth innumerable times, according to the pattern, he invented a system of following it obliquely, so that he commenced and ended, in a corner. He began to count his steps, and to attach a strange importance to the number of them. And when people, passing, innocently crowded him, and spoiled his pattern, he felt irritated.

Then, just when he had succeeded in making his mind an almost perfect blank, the switchboard operator called out: "Mr. Wickett!"

In an instant he was in the booth.

"Hello!"

"Hello?" It was her voice, but even in that single word it seemed to lack the sympathetic timbre of the night before.

According to the etiquette of such occasions, they did not mention names.

"What has happened?" he cried. "I've been here ever since quarter of one!"

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"Been *where*?"

"At the old Martin's in University Place, of course!" He should not have said "of course," and tried to smooth it over by asking solicitously: "Did you misunderstand? Did you go somewhere else? Where did you go?"

"Don't they call it the Lafayette?" she demanded, a note of impatience in her voice. "I've been to both the other Martins'."

He groaned. "Did n't I say University Place? It was terribly stupid of me. I'm awfully sorry!"

"Oh, that's all right," she answered, with discouraging indifference. "It was n't a very sensible plan, anyway, I'm afraid. I suppose you're half famished? I'm just sitting down to luncheon here, at home."

"Oh, don't!" he cried. "I must see you! We can't leave it like this. Meet me half way somewhere—Delmonico's or Sherry's——"

"But I'm hungry. Hunger is death to adventure."

"No! No, it's not!" he almost howled into the instrument.

"And I've dismissed my car."

"Take a taxi."

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"Don't you think we had really better postpone it?"

"No, I don't! Postponement is death to adventure."

"Well," she yielded, "if it's as bad as that ——"

"Heaven bless you!" he broke in fervently. "Where shall we meet?"

"Stay where you are," she said. "If you went out you might get lost again."

Wickett went immediately from the telephone to a window commanding the street. Taxis came and went. He watched them eagerly. When he had stood there for some time, a motor-cab arrived with a solitary lady. She wore a tan suit trimmed with some dark fur. His heart jumped as she alighted. Was it — could it be Mrs. Railey? He had never seen her in a suit. But no. As the woman came up the steps he saw that she was heavier than Mrs. Railey and not so handsome — not nearly. For almost half an hour he remained on watch in the window. Then, becoming acutely restless again, he made the circuit of the rooms.

The woman in the tan suit was seated in a chair near the restaurant doorway.

AT THE OLD CAFÉ MARTIN

"Well!" she exclaimed, rising.

"Mrs. Railey!"

"It began to look as if you had disappeared again," she said, in a sharp tone.

"I was watching in the window," he answered, miserably.

"But I came right up the steps."

The joy he had experienced in truth-telling, the night before, had vanished now, as he declared:

"I saw you, but I did n't know you. A hat and suit make such a difference in a woman."

"Were you watching for a woman in evening dress?" she asked with a laugh that was far from gay.

He sighed heavily, saying: "I seem to have made a hideous mess of everything to-day."

The spirit of adventure was sinking with folded wings.

As they entered the dining-room the old Frenchman whom he had noticed almost two hours before, emerged. He stepped aside politely for Mrs. Railey, and reviewed her as she passed. Then he caught sight of Wickett, and seemed to recognize him. "Ah," his twinkling brown eye seemed to

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say, "so she has arrived at last, your beautiful friend! And a little quarrel, eh? I read it in your faces. That is right, my children. Love, quarrel and love again. You are young. After sixty — trust me, it is so — there is not the zest in life."

CHAPTER IV

WITH FOLDED WINGS

THERE were plenty of tables now. They chose one by a window and seated themselves sedately. The luncheon he had ordered so long ago was now quite out of the question. Some dishes were no longer to be had, others not to be desired at so late an hour.

Like most New York men of his class, Wickett had a somewhat fatuous pride in his ability to order. A good luncheon would not mend matters, perhaps, but it might help. He considered the menu carefully, selecting, discarding, revising. Meanwhile his guest sat motionless save for a foot tapping rapidly upon the carpet. Wickett could feel the tapping through his boot-sole, and it did not soothe him.

To the head waiter who had attended patiently, he gave his order, looking as he did so to Mrs. Railey, for her confirmation of each dish.

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"Guinea-hen?" she interrupted, suddenly. It was the first word she had spoken since they reached the table. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not have guinea-hen. Just something light that won't spoil my dinner."

Nor did his choice in salad suit her. Nor his suggestion of Russian dressing. Even the cold comfort of a hot repast was denied him; under her criticisms the meal degenerated into something like a cold buffet.

"I thought you were hungry?" he said with as little mournfulness as he could.

"I was," she answered wanly, "but somehow my appetite seems to have gone."

Yet on the night before he had thought their tastes alike! How had he fancied such a thing as that? Great chasms yawned between them — one of them a gastronomic chasm.

Elbows on the cloth, chin on hands, she gazed out of the window, into Ninth Street. He looked out, too. The sun cast long shadows across the pavement. It was absurdly late for luncheon. He let his eyes wander back to her. Yes, she was handsome; it was undeniable. Not so handsome, though, as he had thought her. Nor so vivid. Where was

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the spirit of adventure now? What effort had she made to keep it buoyed up? None whatever. The collapse was not altogether his fault. He had *tried*, at least. She should have done the same. She could have shammed a little, anyway, if only for the sake of making matters easier. Molly would have done it. She never would have let things sag away, like this. And she would have wanted a good luncheon, too. That was one of the fine things about Molly — she liked what he liked.

He made another effort.

“Don’t you think,” he asked her, over an egg à *l’estragon*, “that a delay like this — the nervousness of waiting, you know — can give a little added tang to things, sometimes?”

“It does n’t seem so to me,” she said.

“At all events,” he went on, “I hope you ’ll overlook all this bungling I’ve done?”

She had to take her teacup from her lips in order to reply.

“Oh, don’t mention it,” she said, not ungraciously. “Probably the mistake was mine as much as it was yours.”

“No indeed!” he insisted politely. But as he spoke he declared inwardly to himself that he *had*

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said "University Place," all the same, whether she remembered it or not.

"Oh, yes it was. I should have paid more attention to what you said."

"But I should have been more explicit."

As there seemed to be nothing more to say on this subject, they lapsed again into silence. Mrs. Railey picked ruminatively at her salad. Wickett fumbled in his mind for something to say. She was the first to speak, and when she did speak it was in a tone he had not heard since the night before.

"Tell me," she said, her eyes twinkling, "did n't you feel, this morning, as if we'd been foolish? Would n't you have given a good deal to get out of it?"

"Certainly not!" he replied with unconvincing fervor. "Not at all. Would you?"

He had lied like a gentleman. Truth lay dead between them as upon a bier.

"Oh, not exactly, I suppose," said Mrs. Railey, still looking at him quizzically.

In the long silence that followed, Wickett heard a waiter drop a piece of ice into a glass in a far corner of the room, behind him. He took a drink of water.

"Perhaps you'd like some dessert — an ice, or

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some French pastry or something?" he suggested.

"No, thanks."

"You're quite sure?"

"Yes, thanks. It's getting late."

He looked at his watch, and said, "Yes." Then he called the waiter and asked, in a cheerful voice, for the check. The afternoon's adventure was almost at an end.

Mrs. Railey's eyes had been wandering, idly, about the room. Now, suddenly, she drew a sharp breath, and let it go in a smothered exclamation, at the same time bowing her head, as if to conceal her face.

"Don't look around!" she warned.

"No. Is it—?" He would have finished, "your husband," but she interrupted.

"I think it is your wife."

With a sigh of relief he leaned back in his chair.

"It can't be. Where does she sit?"

"Don't look," she cautioned again. "She is directly back of you, three tables away."

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I'm sure it is n't she. But, if it is, it's all right. Of course I'm going to look." He did so, and turned back quickly to reassure her:

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"Nothing like her. I knew it was n't. My wife is an awfully game sort of woman, you know. She would n't have the bad taste to come here under the circum ——"

There he stopped short.

Mrs. Railey's head flew back. Her eyes flashed, large and angry.

"So you told!" she whipped out.

The blood surged to his face.

"As a matter of fact," he floundered, "the trouble was that when I thought it over—at least ——"

"Do you think it was fair?"

"No."

"Why did you do it, then?"

"As a protection to us both."

Her reply was a sniff.

"It was n't square to tell," he went on miserably, "and it was n't square not to tell. But, of the two, telling her seemed best. I told her I proposed this idiotic thing—that it was all my fault ——"

"But if you wished to back out, why did n't you send word to me and call it off?"

"I lacked the courage to do that."

Truth leaped to life again, and grinned.

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"I wish you had n't lacked the courage! I should have been perfectly delighted to get out of it."

"I rather hoped *you* would back out," he owned.

"If you hoped that, why were you so urgent on the 'phone?"

"Well," he hedged, "of course I did want to see you, in a way."

Truth suffered a relapse.

"That was n't it," she declared. "It was because you dreaded to be laughed at by your wife."

The waiter, interrupting with finger-bowl and check, was as welcome as the sight of sunlight to prisoned men. Wickett paid him. He went away.

"Yet, men say," Mrs. Railey reflected aloud, "that women are the ones who can not keep a secret!"

He was too crushed to answer.

"What do you suppose your wife thinks of me?" she demanded.

"She admires you, I'm sure."

"She must admire me!" retorted the lady with bitter irony.

"But she does," he protested. "She told me to go ahead."

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"She evidently considers me dangerous!"

"You would not wish her to think you that?" said he. Then, when she failed to make reply, he added righteously: "I know *I* don't wish to be thought dangerous."

"Console yourself!" she said drily.

The waiter brought his change. Good waiter! Wickett took up a vague portion of it. His guest was drumming on the cloth with nervous fingertips.

"I don't blame you in the least for hating me," he declared. "You may be sure I'm as much ashamed as I ought to be."

A ghastly pause. Then, with a bewildering change of mood, she said to him, almost sweetly: "I've been a very disagreeable guest, Mr. Wickett. Please don't remember me forever as ill-tempered."

"Of course not — not at all."

After gathering up her bag and gloves she arose from the table. They moved toward the door. As he passed the woman she had mistaken for his wife, Wickett looked at her with a strange, numb interest. How could any one have thought she looked like Molly?

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Outdoors, on the steps, Mrs. Railey offered him her hand.

"We are friends?"

He took the hand.

"From the bottom of my heart!" he answered gratefully.

As they descended the steps she said:

"I suppose that what you did — telling, I mean — was really the right thing."

"You are very generous."

He helped her into a taxicab.

"It *has* been an adventure, in a way, after all," she smiled, through the open door.

"And we *are* a little bit alike in some things, are n't we?"

"We are even more alike than you suppose," she agreed, with a humorous nod.

And Truth, who had followed quietly, planted an unfelt harpoon in Wickett's back, and leaped to the seat beside the taxi-driver, as he drove away.

It was half past five when Mrs. Railey alighted at her door. 'Twilight was gone; the street-lamps flickered in the early winter night. She paid the

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driver, crossed the walk, and rang the door-bell. A maid admitted her. The hall glowed agreeably in the light of shaded lamps. On the table just inside the door lay an overcoat and derby hat. She took them up mechanically, and hung them on a hook in the coat closet. Then she went upstairs.

A streak of light, falling across the hall, told her that her husband's bedroom door stood open. She moved toward it. As she came into the light, he saw her.

"Hello, dear," he said, letting fall the ends of the scarf he was about to tie.

"Hello, Fred."

She entered.

"Did he give you a good lunch?" he asked.
"Are n't you glad you decided to go, after all?"

She took one of his hands and patted it abstractedly.

"It was funny," she said slowly, "and it was dreadful, and he's really very nice. I'll tell you about it at dinner. Now I must dress."

She dropped his hand and moved away. But at the door she turned.

"I've learned one thing," she said. "There's

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nothing in adventure after thirty-four. It's too much effort."

And Truth, the tired little god, who had followed her upstairs, sat down and crossed his legs and sighed a happy sigh. For he felt very much at home.

CHAPTER V

THE STIMULATING MRS. BARTON

THOUGH he was able, after a month or two, to perceive certain humorous aspects of the failure of his enterprise with Mrs. Railey, Wickett remained, for some time thereafter, a chastened being. Adventure, he felt, was not for him. Worse things, there were, after all, than placid matrimonial drifting. So it seemed to him for a considerable time.

Then, one summer, he encountered Mrs. Barton. The Bartons had rented for the season a large house at the other side of the golf links from the Wicketts' place. Having much money, no children, and a taste for entertaining, it was felt by many members of the country club that they made a delightful addition to the community. Mr. Barton was fat and placid; and Mrs. Barton who had burning eyes, and who admitted to the possession of a

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"temperament," credited him with the phenomenal feat of failing to comprehend her.

Finding Mrs. Barton stimulating, Wickett commenced, without quite realizing at first what he was doing, a mild flirtation with her; and then, becoming aware of the flirtation, and finding it agreeable, he began in his own mind to justify it.

For one thing, he told himself, it was not serious; and for another, it never would have happened had Molly kept herself a little more alive — a little more the sweetheart and a little less the matter-of-fact wife and mother. Wistfully he thought of their first years together. She had been a real companion then, up and ready for anything at a moment's notice, whether a gay evening in New York or a tour of Europe with a kit bag and a pair of suitcases. But all that lay behind, now. Any proposal calculated to alter her domestic routine was sure to be rejected — because she had (or had n't) done her marketing for Sunday; because of the expense; more frequently because of the children.

So, one day, instead of asking Molly in to town for luncheon, he invited Mrs. Barton. They lunched at the Ritz, and had a bottle of choice Château Latour (oh, he'd have done as much for

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Molly if she had given him the chance!) and exchanged horizontal glances and intimate ideas.

The luncheon went off beautifully, and the episode of Mrs. Railey was so remote that Wickett never even thought of it. Lunching with Mrs. Barton seemed, somehow, quite another sort of thing. It was delightful. So, presently they tried it again — and again — and again. And as they ate and drank and talked their way along, they discovered that they “understood” each other, and told each other so — with subtle implication that certain other people failed to understand them. Thus, by degrees, they became sorry for each other, and perhaps a little sorry for themselves. Wickett began to think of Mrs. Barton as a combination of Sappho, Helen of Troy, Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Hamilton, Isolde, and Guinevere; and of himself as a blend of Paris, Tristan, Rizzio, Launcelot and other notoriously ardent gentlemen. It seemed to him that, but for his family, his coffee business, and the conventional and commercial era in which he had the misfortune to exist, his name might have echoed down through history as that of an exceptionally picturesque and torrid lover.

When Mrs. Barton talked to him about her

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temperament he discovered that he had one of his own. Had he not been on the glee club at college? Had he not taken part in amateur dramatics, and even written a verse that was published in the college paper? He had! But after graduation stern necessity had forced him to abandon Art for coffee. He began to see the matter as a tragedy — though just what branch of Art he had given up he never told Mrs. Barton. Possibly it was poetry. At all events, he had a relapse when Mrs. Barton had a birthday, for he wrote her what she called a "poem," in which he rhymed "hair" and "fair" — and what poet could make a more perfect rhyme than that?

As he became increasingly conscious of the unfathomable depth of his artistic nature, Wickett acquired the habit of dropping in on Osgood, the illustrator, who had a bungalow not far away. He liked to go there Sunday mornings, while Molly represented the family at church. He would fling himself upon Osgood's couch, wave an arm at the untidiness about him, and proclaim with heavy sighs that but for cruel fate he too might have been living "this sort of life." Then he would look at Osgood's latest drawings, nod his head wisely, and

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tell Osgood exactly what he did n't like about them.

The apparent seriousness with which the young illustrator listened to him would have been more creditable had it been prompted by mere hospitality, or a desire to learn. But that was n't it. Osgood liked Molly Wickett. She not only gave charming little dinners to which he was invited with steadily increasing frequency, but — oh! her complexion was like a bunch of pink and white sweet-peas, and her eyes were like a pair of cornflowers, and her ways were baffling beyond belief. You never knew what she was thinking, or what she was going to say. She was Mystery personified.

And Molly liked Osgood. She liked his curious unconventional ways, his periods of dreamy abstraction followed by flashes of intense and eager interest, in which he emphasized his utterances with gestures of the arms and head. There was an earnest, frank, ingenuous look in his brown eyes which was boyish and charming, and which called (Molly told herself) upon her "mother-instinct." She worried over him: over his fantastic bachelor housekeeping, his dish-washing, the colds he caught and neglected (and got over), the buttons he sewed on, or failed to sew on, and the half-tame mouse

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which he called Henrietta and allowed to run about his studio.

Now, every one who has lived — even those who have not lived, but have gathered their ideas of life from plays and stories — knows that situations such as this are likely to reach climaxes of one kind or another.

The climax in the Wicketts' case arrived upon the night of one of the summer dances at the country club.

Several days beforehand, Molly proposed to her husband that, as Mr. Barton was away and Mrs. Barton liked to dance, they ask her to dine with them that evening, and go on, later, to the club.

Wickett said he thought that would be nice. Deep down in his heart he was a little bit amused at Molly's blindness.

"Is there any one else you 'd like me to ask in to make us four at table?" she inquired.

"How about Osgood?"

Molly said she thought that would be nice — said it with an I-had n't-thought-of-him expression.

So the dinner was arranged.

It began delightfully, that dinner. But as the

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entrée was being served, there came, from above, a wailing sound which caused the hostess to excuse herself hurriedly and scamper upstairs; and which caused Mrs. Barton to reflect that, thank goodness, *her* dinner-parties were not subject to such interruption — one had enough trouble with one's cook and one's Pomeranian!

Presently the wailing ceased and Molly returned. Mrs. Barton made polite inquiries, and was informed that little Shelley had a stomach-ache.

"Poor little tad!" she said, in her sympathetic, mellow voice.

("What a wonderful mother she would have made!" thought Wickett to himself.)

"Yes," said Molly. "He *was* pathetic. He asked why God sent him the stomach-ache."

"How *fascinating* of him!" Mrs. Barton said. "You have such *charming* children."

"Of course *we* think so," beamed Molly, reflecting to herself that perhaps Mrs. Barton had her good points, after all.

One of her good points was a pearl necklace, and Molly took care to admire it, a little later, in the living-room, while the men were having their cigars. Then, when the cigars were pretty well burned down,

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there came the momentary glare of headlights through the window-shades, and the barely audible purr of a motor.

"Here's the car," said Wickett. He arose, glancing first at Mrs. Barton, then at his wife.

"Now, listen," Molly said, looking from one to another. "I'm not going. But you're all to go on just the same. I won't hear of anything else. There's nothing really the matter with little Shelley, But he might wake up again and want me, and I simply could n't be happy away from the house."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Mrs. Barton said.

"He'll be all right with Katie," declared Wickett.

"Katie is n't his mother," Molly affirmed, with a defiant little nod.

"Well — do as you think best, dear," said Wickett, with the air of one who surrenders only after a hard fought battle. "I should insist upon staying, myself, but, you see ——"

"Suppose we *all* stay?" suggested Mrs. Barton in a sweet, self-sacrificing tone.

"No, no, no!" protested Molly, shepherding them toward the door. "If you don't go at once you'll make me very uncomfortable!"

Evidently Wickett and Mrs. Barton did not wish

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to make her uncomfortable, for Wickett went at once for his overcoat, and Mrs. Barton wafted filmily upstairs to get her wrap. Only Osgood hesitated.

"Oh, say, Mrs. Wickett," he protested, in his impetuous, boyish way, "let me stay behind, won't you? I don't want to go to this darn dance, anyhow. I hate dances. Honestly I do. I just came to be with you — with you people."

"Nonsense!" called Wickett, from the hall. "Come along, Osgood. You'll have a good time."

"You'll meet lots of attractive girls there," Molly said.

"Girls!" sniffed Osgood contemptuously, as if to imply that girls were the last things in the world to interest him. Then, turning a gaze of deep sincerity upon his hostess, he said: "Truly, Mrs. Wickett, if you want to be very, very nice to me you'll let me stay a while and talk."

Molly hesitated. "Of course," she said, "if you really mean it ——"

"But I do!"

"I'm sure it's mighty decent in you, Osgood," said Wickett, who was already in his overcoat.

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"I'd gladly stay behind, myself, but you see Mrs. Barton loves to dance, so I really feel —" Hearing that lady's step upon the stair, he did not finish.

"Oh, you must go, of course," Osgood agreed, *sotto voce*. "But don't thank me for staying behind; I'm really very glad to."

Then Mrs. Barton came into the room with good nights which somehow reminded Osgood of the frosting on a fancy wedding-cake.

He and Molly followed the other pair to the front door and watched them get into the car. Then, as the bloodshot eye of the tail-light disappeared down the drive, they turned back to the living-room.

Molly crossed to a spacious table laden with books and magazines and lighted by a rotund lamp, and, taking up a piece of embroidery, sat down where the light would fall upon her work. Osgood did not seat himself. He walked with slow, aimless steps to the far end of the room, drew a fresh cigar from his pocket, and having lighted it, turned and regarded Molly curiously. Her head was bent; her needle passed swiftly back and forth through the linen stretched upon the little drumlike frame. The young man swung about again, and, strolling to the

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open French windows, gazed through the screen door at the little formal garden just outside.

"You made the gardens, did n't you?" he asked her, presently, over his shoulder.

"Yes," she said.

He drew a deep breath of the soft air that filtered in. "They're gorgeous now, in the moonlight," he said. "Don't you want to put down your work and come outside?"

"Yes, I think I do." She arose, laid her embroidery upon the table, and moved toward the door. He held the screen door open and inclined his head as she stepped out before him into the moonlight and the fragrance.

Passing the pool, from which the moon looked up at them like a disk of Chinese gold, they strolled to a seat in the shadow of the hedge.

"Shall we sit here?" he asked her.

Obediently, she seated herself.

Tossing away four inches of cigar, he dropped to a place beside her. His elbows rested on his knees. He regarded her beneath his brows, and as he did so, struck a fist in slow, abstracted repetition, into the palm of the other hand.

"The air is so still," he said at last, "that it

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seems as if one could almost hear the moonlight."

She held up a hand for silence.

"Listen!" she whispered. "It's not the moonlight. It's the music at the club."

In the silence that ensued they both heard it, rising and falling as it wafted to them across the links on intermittent zephyrs which were like the soft breathing of the summer night.

CHAPTER VI

MOONLIGHT AND SYRINGAS

THERE is a terrace at the Country Club — a wonderful wide terrace facing eastward toward Long Island Sound — and on that terrace are tall syringa bushes, and in the shadow of the bushes is a marble seat of classic and uncomfortable design, and on that seat sat Wickett and Mrs. Barton — and hardly knew that it was not upholstered.

Wickett had not even said it was too hot for dancing; Mrs. Barton had not even said she had a headache; on arriving at the club they had gone by tacit agreement to that seat upon the terrace, and had forthwith lost all track of time. The whole world seemed to them to be composed of flower-scents and music and the dust of moon and stars. And oh, the mystery there was about her in that nocturnal light! And oh, the rapt intensity of the gaze with which his eyes caressed her as they sat there talking in low voices about Men and Women, Life and Love.

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Presently she said:

"How wonderful it is that we can talk about these things, yet keep it all impersonal!"

The moon was making silver outlines of her; he did not feel impersonal at all.

"Vera!" he breathed. It was the first time that he had called her by her given name.

"It has been so perfect, this companionship of ours," she murmured. "Oh, Shelley! Surely it can't be — be ——" She did not finish.

"Be what?" he asked in a strained voice.

"It can't be *wrong*, can it?"

"Wrong?" he repeated. "I don't know, Vera; and I don't care!"

"You should n't say that."

"I do say it."

"But *ought n't* we to care? Ought n't we to care more than we do? Is n't there danger of our growing rash — driven on and on by our — our hunger — yes, that's it: our *hunger!* — for companionship and sympathy and understanding?"

Her voice broke; he heard her catch her breath.

"But would you," he demanded with intensity, "deny two living, feeling, human beings — a man and a woman — the right to companionship and un-

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derstanding? Would you do that, Vera? No. You could n't! It would be too cruel!"

"That's just it!" she whispered. "Tell me, Shelley: Have you ever known the utter dullness of living, day in, day out, with a person whose every thought and every word is known to you before it is uttered?"

At that he bent over and buried his face in his palms.

"Have I?" he groaned. "*Have I!* Oh, Vera! Don't ask me!"

In a quick access of tenderness she laid a hand lightly upon his hair. At that he sat up suddenly, and leaning toward her, found her hand.

"Vera! You are so strange — so wonderful!"

He heard her draw a quivering breath.

Then, drugged with the deadly combination of woman and scent and moon and music, he bent impetuously and kissed her.

And an instant after he had kissed her he was sorry, for he realized, even as his lips touched hers, that he did not love her. That, at the moment, was a disappointment; for he craved to love — to love magnificently, tragically — and just before the kiss he had almost thought he did. Illusion! He

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became conscious that the marble seat was hard and cold.

"Why — *why* did you kiss me?" she murmured.

The question annoyed him. He had felt a curious premonition that she was about to ask it. It was the very question that he asked himself. Why *had* he kissed her? He did n't know. Perhaps he could find out by doing it again.

He tried it.

"Don't!" she whispered, drawing back a little
"Shelley — *don't!*"

Promptly — more promptly, perhaps, than he should have — he desisted. And as he did so there came to him out of the long ago the memory of a schoolgirl with two braids down her back. Her name was Janie — Janie Vaughan. She had been his almost-first love. And when, upon a boyish impulse, he kissed her for the first time, she said "Don't!" to him, like that. There were syringa bushes, too. Syringas always made him think of Janie. Whom might she be saying "Don't" to now, he wondered — or had she, perhaps, since becoming a woman, thought of something else to say?

Mrs. Barton had risen to her feet.

"This is folly!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

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"Oh, Shelley! It can't go on! Don't you *see* it can't? We must ——"

"Part?" he filled in, obligingly, as with a definite feeling of relief, he also arose.

His legs felt stiff. Surreptitiously he stretched them.

She nodded.

"It's the only thing to do. I must go at once. Just send me home in your car. Don't try to accompany me. I wish to be alone ——"

"Of course," he chimed in. "Alone with your thoughts."

"Ah," she breathed, "how *wonderfully* you have learned to *understand* me!"

At that truth he sighed profoundly.

"Just friends!" she said, and offered him her hand.

His sense of duty told him that he ought to seize her in his arms, but he could not bring himself to do it.

"As you wish." In his tone and the pressure that he gave her hand he tried to suggest fervor.

"I'll get my wrap. Don't come into the club with me. I'd rather you did n't."

"Very well," he said, standing before her with

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bowed head. "While you're inside I'll call the car."

A few minutes later, beneath the brilliant lights of the portico, he handed her into his limousine.

"You need n't come back for me," he said to his chauffeur. "I'm going to walk home."

As she heard him say that, Mrs. Barton shot him a quick understanding glance. He, too, she was fain to believe, wished to be "alone with his thoughts." And of a truth, he did.

As the car drove away he set out across the links in the direction of his home.

The close cropped turf, exquisitely soft and cool beneath the thin soles of his pumps, stretched out before him like a luminous carpet of green and silver. Behind him, fainter and fainter, he heard the music of the dance. Ragtime! Oh, he was sick and tired of it!

A low-lying olive cloud, shadowy and mysterious, became, as he drew near, a clump of trees. He rounded it, and presently reached the low stone wall separating his garden from the eleventh green. Placing one hand upon the capstone, he vaulted over into his own domain, and made his way up the grass path between the beds of hardy perennials shimmer-

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ing at him in the silver light. Beyond the hardy garden he followed the curving margins of the rose beds, until at length he reached the tall, stiff privet hedge which marked the limits of the formal garden, nestling in the shadow of the house.

His nearest way indoors lay through the formal garden, access to which was given by an architectural arch of privet — a masterpiece of which the gardener was inordinately proud. But Wickett did not pass the arch. As he reached it, his ear was struck by an unfamiliar sound which caused him to stop.

The sound was a peculiar kind of little song, and it seemed to him to come from somewhere near the far end of the hedge, where stood the pump-house.

Until the week before, there had been a gas-engine in the pump-house; but it had balked, and balked, and balked, until, at last, Wickett had been irritated into ordering a more up-to-date contrivance to replace it — an electric motor which turned itself on and off automatically, as water was required in the tank or not. The new machine had been there for some days, but Wickett had not found the time to go and look at it. He would do it now. Not that anything would be accomplished by his looking

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at it; but that it is the universal custom for men with country places to go and look at things. Even now it would not have occurred to him to drop in at the pump-house, had it not been for the fact that, as he reached the privet arch, the motor suddenly began to work, emitting, as it did so, its soft, crescendo song.

He turned off and skirted the outer wall of the hedge. The song grew louder in his ears. Then, suddenly, the tank must have filled up, for the automatic cut-out worked, and the motor stopped abruptly. The abruptness with which it stopped surprised him. Silence succeeded for the briefest moment.

Then he heard voices just beyond the hedge.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE FORMAL GARDEN

TO Molly and young Osgood, seated in the garden in the shadow of the inclosing privet, the whole world seemed to be composed of flower-scents and music and the dust of moon and stars. And oh, the mystery there was about her in that nocturnal light! And oh, the rapt intensity of the gaze with which his eyes caressed her as, having lost all track of time, they sat there talking in low voices about Men and Women, Life and Love.

It was all impersonal at first, but presently he said:

"You knew I did n't want to go to the dance. You knew I wanted to stay!"

She looked up at the stars as she answered:

"I believed you when you said so."

"Molly!" he said — it was the first time that he had called her by her given name — "Molly, you knew without my saying so!"

"Well?"

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"And you knew why!"

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"I think so," she answered. "It is because you like me — just as I like you."

"Like!" He stressed the word ironically. Then:

"Did you ever feel that ideas were fluttering through your mind like a flight of gorgeous butterflies? That you'd like to catch them and show them to some one, but feared to try, lest you injure them? That is the way it is with my idea of you. It flutters on a thousand golden wings. I want to catch it and show it to you — I want to tell you what I think you are. But I can't. You see, I'm not a lyric poet. And I'm not a composer — I can't compose another *Liebestod* for you, and, if I could, I have no voice in which to sing it to you. I'm not able to tell you, Molly, because there are only the old dead words, as dry as winter twigs. For you I want new ones — wonderful words that glow and shimmer like the moonlight!"

"I'm not sure," she said, "that you haven't found them — and too many! But your idea of me is wrong. I'm just an ordinary woman — magically endowed, perhaps, for the moment, by the

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moon and your imagination. I'm getting matronly — oh, yes, I am! — and besides, I'm old enough to be your mother."

"You're *not!*" he protested vehemently. "It is n't so! You're only four years older!"

"More than that," she told him. "I'm four years and two children and one husband older. And you'd better be glad. You will be, some day. You'll talk to some sweet girl as you have talked to me, and she'll marry you — she can't help it — and you'll be happy, and I — I'll be a nice, round old lady, who will come to visit, and be godmother to your children, and spoil them terribly."

"Oh, don't wait for that!" he sighed. "Spoil *me!* I love you!" Then, drugged with the deadly combination of woman and scent and moon and music, he bent impetuously, and kissed her.

And an instant after he had kissed her she was glad, for she realized, even as his lips touched hers, that she did not love him. She had been just a little bit afraid she did.

"Why did you kiss me?" she asked reproachfully.

"I love you!" he repeated, as if that were an answer to all the questions in the universe.

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Those were the two utterances which wafted on the stillness of the night across the hedge to Wickett.

The words crashed upon his senses as unexpectedly, as astoundingly, as bruisingly, as if the bricks of his own house had toppled down upon him.

For an instant he was dazed. Then he felt, rising and burning within him like a mass of molten metal, the savage instinct of the outraged male. His first impulse was to project himself furiously through the hedge. But two things deterred him. For one, the hedge was thick and high, and, even as he raged, he realized that an angry husband in evening dress, thrashing wildly in a mass of privet, would make a picture more absurd than menacing. For another, the remnants of his scattered reason told him that a "scene" would only dignify the fellow's impudence. No! He would not take part unless he saw that Molly needed him. She had been a fool to get herself into this! She might have known young Osgood for an impressionable idiot. He was one of those "artistic" people! She should have had the sense to pack him off to his beastly bungalow an hour or two since — or at least to have stayed indoors out of the moonlight. And she a married

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woman, too! But this would be a lesson to her — a much needed lesson; for she was altogether too ingenuous! It was time she found out what men *were* — time she understood the fascination exercised upon them by such a woman as herself. A wave of admiration for his wife swept over him. She was an attractive woman — tremendously attractive! And she had spirit, too — lots of it — for all her gentleness and pink-and-whiteness! She was quite capable of settling this young man. Well — *let her, then!*

Now, hearing his wife's voice, he held his breath.

"Of course I knew you were fond of me," she said, in a clear, cool tone. "But as for loving you I simply don't; that's all. I have given my love once — given all I have. And you don't love me, either. You only think you do. So both of us are going to forget that anything like this has ever happened."

Listening, Wickett approved the first part of what she said, but thought the last of it too weak. Osgood was getting off too easily.

"I'm sorry!" he heard the young man murmur. "It was my fault."

"No," said Molly stoutly. "It was not your

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fault, but mine. I did wrong to come and sit here with you. And I knew I was doing wrong, but to tell the truth, I took the risk just because ——” She broke off without finishing.

“Because — what?” asked Osgood eagerly.

“Never mind,” she said; and Wickett could tell, by the little rustling that he heard and the crunch of gravel, that they had risen to their feet.

“Pleasel” the young man urged. “Tell me — just to show that I’m forgiven!”

A moment’s silence followed, and in that silence Wickett heard his own heart thumping. Hardly less eagerly than Osgood, he hoped his wife would answer. What *was* the truth which she had begun to tell — and stopped? Had she been jealous of him? Had she seen more than he thought that she had seen? Had she, in her heart, resented his attentions to Mrs. Barton? Had she come out here with Osgood through sheer pique? He felt a mad desire to seize her in his arms, and hold her close, and tell her he had never really cared for any other woman, and that he never, never would!

Then she spoke again.

“Very well,” she said; “I’ll tell you. And what I’m going to tell is the Masonic secret of the mar-

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ried, which you have no right to know. It is the reason why my husband wished to go alone with Mrs. Barton to-night, and the reason why Mrs. Barton wished to go with him. It is the reason why I stayed at home — on their account as well as on my own; and it is the reason why I ventured here with you. This is the secret: Husbands and wives each become a little tired, now and then, of always knowing, in advance, exactly what the other is going to do and think and say.”

Standing silent in the moonlight, Wickett heard their footsteps on the gravel as they moved away. He was filled with an extremely strange assortment of mixed feelings. Whether he had a right to be or not, he was still a little angry. He was self-reproachful, too. He was jealous. He was more in love than he had ever been before. He was very glad and very sorry, all at once, about a lot of things. But, above all, he was amazed.

He had not known that she was going to say that!

CHAPTER VIII

OLD HIG

A CERTAIN symbolism may perhaps be discovered in the fact that the weather masquerading in New York under the name of winter was of unexampled fickleness that season when, after the lapse of more years than he liked to count, Wickett met again his almost-first love.

Remotely the weather was responsible. From the time the Wicketts closed their house in the country and moved to their apartment in New York, a capricious climate oscillated betwixt conditions almost polar and almost tropical; the children caught cold on cold, until at last it was decided that, though Shelley could not leave the active coffee market, Molly and the children must go south.

For the next few days it seemed to Wickett that his wife's head, like her bedroom, was merely a repository for a vast confusion of luggage and light clothing. Trunks were brought up from the

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basement storeroom and placed where people would fall over them; then, just when the father of the family was learning to avoid them, an expressman came and took them all away; and soon thereafter Wickett found himself in the motor, driving with his flock through slushy streets to the station. Their progress through that stupendous building to the train was loose, wild, Arabian, and it was with a sense of real relief that the paterfamilias saw them all settled at last, with their belongings, in two adjoining staterooms.

When the turmoil had in some degree subsided and he was giving the tickets and baggage checks to Molly, simultaneously receiving from her certain final information having to do with cooks and butchers, there came sudden clamor from the children in the next compartment.

"Uncle Archie! Uncle Archie!" they shrieked, hammering on the windowpanes.

It was indeed Archie Higgins and his appearance at the train, gift-laden, was thoroughly consistent, for he was Wickett's best friend, had been best man at his wedding, and acted not only as honorary uncle to the children, but as a kind of all-year-round Santa Claus, seizing on the least opportunity to transform

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an ordinary day into a festival of giving. Molly declared that he even looked as Santa would have, had he been forty years of age, shaved, and costumed with careful conventionality by a Fifth Avenue tailor. Again, like Santa, Higgins had no immediate family, but adopted and was adopted by the families of his friends; that is to say he was a bachelor — one of those comfortable, incorrigible bachelors whose greatest fault in the eyes of their married intimates is that they persist in remaining bachelors. For years Molly had dangled girls before him as an angler dangles varied flies before a sophisticated trout. But though sometimes he had the air of almost taking them, he always turned away in time and darted back to the safe shadows of his singleness.

Like raiding robber-barons the children rushed to the corridor, dragged Higgins in and despoiled him. There was a bunch of violets for big Molly, a doll for little Molly, a conjurer's outfit for little Shelley, and a breastpin of terrible magnificence for Katie, the nurse.

Having plundered their adopted uncle the children were persuaded to withdraw again to the next room. Higgins sat down.

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"I'm glad you came, Archie," Molly said. "I want you to keep an eye on Shelley while I'm gone."

"In what particular?" Higgins asked.

"The usual thing," she answered with a smile in which wisdom, resignation and motherlike appreciation of her husband's shortcomings were blended.

"And what may that be?" inquired Higgins, making a loyal effort to look blank.

"His susceptibility. You must n't let him fall in love."

"Molly!" exclaimed Wickett reproachfully.

"No use looking like a mournful spaniel," she informed him, still smiling that disconcerting smile of hers. Then, to Higgins: "If there's any falling in love, you do it, Archie."

"Very well," Higgins returned with mock gravity. "If it becomes necessary in order to save Shelley, perhaps I will."

"Oh," jeered Wickett. "I suppose you'd just sail in and cut me out, would you?"

"Without wishing to rouse professional jealousy in you," returned his friend blandly, "that is precisely what I'd do."

Being some years Higgins' junior, it was

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Wickett's custom, when chaffing, to attribute to the other the qualities of the lean and slippered pantaloons.

"Well!" he exclaimed in burlesque surprise. "Can there be life in the old hoss yet? I call you to witness, Molly dear, that if I get into mischief while you're gone — which I sha'n't, of course — it will only be because I'm led into it by this old roué you're always holding up to me as an example."

"Pay no attention to him," Molly advised Higgins, siding, wifelike, against her husband. "I'll never worry over him while he's under your wing, Archie."

"And that's where I mean to have him to-night," Higgins said.

"What's on?" asked Wickett.

"Dinner and the theater."

"Oh, I had planned" — he spoke with an exaggerated air of virtue — "to spend the evening at home, being lonesome."

"Beautiful picture!" said his friend, ironically.

As Wickett was about to retort, the cry of "All aboard!" was heard; whereupon, after hurried farewells, he and Higgins issued to the platform and

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stood there, smiling inanely at Molly and the children through the car windows until those windows began gently to glide away.

The air of mild melancholy that settled over Wickett as he turned from the departing train hung about him until, after going home and dressing for the evening, he met Higgins at the club. There, however, his spirits rose. It seemed like old times to be dining at the club, to be seated at the corner table where he always used to sit, and to be looking across a bottle of '95 Laffitte, reposing like a sleepy baby in its wicker bassinet, at the placid, cheerful visage of old Hig. By the time they started for the theater the oppressive feeling of sedate loneliness was gone out of him, giving place to one of ebullient youth, such as he had begun to think he was never to experience again.

CHAPTER IX

REËNTER JANIE VAUGHN

THE first act of "The Divine Dilemma" was already in progress when they took their seats; but it was clear that the curtain had not long been up, because the Butler and the Maid were on the stage talking about Miss Angela's imminent return. The Butler told the Maid to be sure that Miss Angela's room was ready, as she would be tired from her journey; and the Maid replied that of course the room was ready — did she not love Miss Angela as much as any of the rest of them? Besides being so beautiful, so rich, so adored, had not Miss Angela a heart of gold? And, who should know it better than she? Had not Miss Angela nursed her — a mere servant — through a long illness? Not to be outdone in praise of the approaching paragon, the Butler here reminded the Maid that Miss Angela had prevented his being discharged for drunkenness and caused him to reform completely.

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They were interrupted at this point by the appearance of the blond Young Lovers — a girlish boy in white flannels and a hoydenish girl in baby blue — who, after proving their youth by chasing each other round a table, sat on it and swung their feet as they told how much they both loved Angela because she had saved the baby-blue girl from drowning.

In the midst of a kittenish scene between these two, appeared the Uncle, bent, benignant, bald. There was a heavy crease across his forehead where the bald head met the skin. He was followed by the sweet-faced, white-wigged Aunt.

“Ah, my dear, is not that your new gray silk gown?” . . . “Yes, my love; I am wearing it in honor of dear Angela’s return.”

And then the old Colonel — bluff, gruff, tried and true — frock coat and spats. He mentioned Angela’s horsemanship with warm appreciation, saying, “Egad!” and calling her a “gal.”

Lowering their voices they spoke of young Beresford. A fine lad! He and Angela, so it appeared, had been engaged. Then abruptly it was broken off. No one knew why. They only knew that Angela departed suddenly for the Riviera as the guest of Lady Ponsonby, while young Beresford had

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gone in for aviation and was taking the wildest chances.

It was, in short, the beginning of an English comedy. For the rest, suffice it to say that when the audience was overstuffed with Angela there came from behind the scenery a burring sound, not altogether unlike that of a motor, succeeded by the Bonk-bonk! of a motor horn — for on the stage the horn is always blown as the motor stops at the door.

At this the persons in the scene stood motionless, gazing intently at the French windows, smiling eagerly, and uttering brief variants of, "Ah, here she comes! . . . Here comes dear Angela at last!"

Naturally the audience gazed at the French windows too. Then, when they had been kept waiting exactly long enough, and were tantalized to the highest pitch of expectancy, Angela appeared. And, for a wonder — considering all that had been said of her — no one in the audience was disappointed.

She was rather tall and there was something very graceful and alluring in the way she moved about, greeting in succession each character on the scene; and there was the same grace and lure in the gesture of her arms as she raised them to remove her hat.

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For, besides being beautiful, the actress who played Angela was possessed in rare degree of that rich gift called magnetism; she attracted eyes and made them follow her, causing men to think: "I wish I knew her," and women to think: "I wish I knew her dressmaker."

Higgins was instantly intrigued. He confessed it later. As for Wickett, he leaned forward on sight of her and stared intently through narrowed lids. Then, in haste, he took his program up and scanned it closely in the half light.

Janie Vaughan! There was her name on the playbill — her own name; that was like her too! — removing all shadow of doubt. It was actually Janie! He had recognized her instantly; even had she used a stage name he would not have been deceived; it was impossible that another person should possess so completely her figure, her style of moving, her sweet voice. And those other individual characteristics — how well he remembered them! The soft sweep of the dark hair across her forehead; the flicker at the corners of her mouth, so humorous, so mischievous; the audacious look imparted to her by the slight uptilting of her lovely nose; the good little devils laughing from her wide blue eyes.

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How long since he had seen her? She had been sixteen when, at twenty-two, he fell in love with her. Swift computation told him she was thirty-one now; that more than a dozen years had passed since they had parted. Incredible! Dared he hope that the years had dealt with him as leniently as with her? From her they had taken nothing; to her they had given much. Without losing the qualities of youth she had gained those of maturity.

A warm, mild something fluttered in his veins as his thoughts ran back to the days when he had known her. For three years their "crush" had lasted. Picnics, tennis matches, football games, dances. How wonderful had been that boyish sense of possession. How long it seemed since he had seen her — since he had seen the town in which they used to live.

When in the course of intervening years he had thought of her, it was as she used to look at summer-evening dances at the tennis club, under the Chinese lanterns dangling so picturesquely and so slyly dripping candle grease. Always in his memory's picture she wore a frilly pink tulle evening gown; sometimes she would be dancing with somebody else, sometimes with him; or, tenderest memory of all,

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she would be sitting out a dance with him on that green garden bench in the shade of the syringas. Never since then had he smelled syringas without a thought of her, of the evening when he kissed her for the first time, of her thrilled voice saying "Don't!" and of other evenings afterward. And now, as with her before him the recollection of those enchanted evenings of their youth returned to him, he seemed to see the moonlight, hear the music, smell the flowers, and feel again the sweet warmth of her lips. Was it indeed so long ago? The years seemed suddenly to have foreshortened, as it were, moving her once more into the foreground of his life. Yes, he had loved her! She had been — he told himself — the one big love of his young manhood. Others had come and gone. There had been one or two before, perhaps — he hardly remembered. And of course there had been several since. But Janie! Their love, half childish, half mature, had been very real and very sweet. Did not this emotion he felt on seeing her again prove that? Looking at her in the flower of her womanhood, it was not hard for him, being of the nature that he was, to make himself believe that the memory of her had

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indeed been enshrined above all other memories in his heart.

If the thought of their parting — and, more especially, the reason for it — came to him at all, he did not permit himself to dwell upon it. It was the romance of his finding her again that filled his mind. How like a novel — his going to the theater casually and there coming quite by chance on his old love, now a distinguished actress! How had she risen? What had her life been? What was it now? Had she married? If so, whom? And if not, why? Was she happy, or divorced — or both? Had she “lived” and “suffered,” as the saying is? No doubt. Without analyzing his feelings he selected the latter supposition as being somehow the most appropriate; yet, as he thought of it, he felt stirring within him a mild jealousy of a vague and supposititious some one for whom he fancied she had cared.

But what, after all, was the use in guessing? Of facts about her later life he had but two: he had heard five or six years ago of her having gone upon the stage; some time later he had come on her picture in a magazine. “An actress of beauty and tal-

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ent," the caption called her. "A popular favorite of the Pacific Slope."

As the picture was particularly pretty he had shown it, with a casual air, to Molly, and told her of his early love affair with Janie, feeling that it counterbalanced rather handsomely her stories of that boy named Ray, the flame of her high-school days, who at last accounts was working in an insurance office in Pittsburgh. Not very romantic, the insurance business. Not much of a career. Nothing like Janie's!

What was she like? he wondered. She spoke now with a broad "a." That was to be expected. Did she by any chance think with a broad "a," too? The stage, he had heard, was likely to work changes in character as well as diction. Was it possible that success had altered her? He would find out. He would see her. Like an invitation it was, his rediscovering her on the very day that Molly went away. Molly would not mind, of course—that is, she would n't mind when she had once met Janie and seen how fine she was—though until that time the word "actress" might better be kept out of it, perhaps.

"How do you like the leading woman?" he asked

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Higgins when the curtain had descended at the end of the first act.

‘ She ’s all I do like,” returned the other. “ I ’d like to bite her ! ”

“ I don’t believe I can arrange *that*,” answered Wickett with a smile, “ but would you like to meet her ? ”

Higgins turned and looked at him.

“ Mean to say you know her ? ”

“ I used to, very well, when we were youngsters. I thought I ’d ask her out for supper if you did n’t mind.”

“ Mind ? I should say not ! ”

“ Then,” replied Wickett, “ I ’ll drop round to the stage door in the next intermission and see whether she can go.”

CHAPTER X

THE STAGE DOOR

THE stage door was an inconspicuous portal in a dimly lighted side street. A wooden vestibule surrounded it; and in that vestibule, on a kitchen chair tilted back against the board wall, sat a surly man of indeterminate age, wearing on one side of his head a battered derby hat. He regarded Wickett silently and with the expression of an ugly dog who perceives a tramp at the very entrance of its kennel.

"I'd like to see Miss Vaughan," said Wickett, handing the man his card.

Without rising or moving more than necessary, the man took the card, read it, turned it over, as though to see whether anything were written on the back, looked Wickett over from head to foot and demanded, as if he had not heard:

"Wha' d'ya want?"

"I want to see Miss Vaughan."

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"She's dressing."

"I suppose so. Are you the doorman?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Well, then, will you take my card to her, please?"

The doorman's manner showed plainly that he wished to say No — and say it impolitely. That is the instinct of all doormen. He contemplated Wickett speculatively for a moment, as though wondering how far it would be safe to go.

Then, as the other's eyes returned his gaze unfalteringly and with a look that was becoming dangerous, he grunted, rose very slowly and, without a word, opened the heavy door leading to the stage, passed in and let it slam behind him, leaving Wickett to draw his own conclusions as to why he went and where, and whether or not he intended to return.

Irritated yet amused, Wickett spent the next few moments looking at the half-tone portraits of actors, actresses and pugilists with which the doorman had, it appeared, papered his lair in idle moments when there was no one there to whom he might show incivility. Presently, when Wickett had begun to think of opening the inner door himself and looking for his dubious emissary, it was pushed outward a

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little and the head, with its battered covering, appeared in the aperture.

"She 'll see you now," said the doorman reluctantly. With that, he drew in his head and let the door go, that the visitor might open it for himself.

Wickett did so and entered. After the bright light of the vestibule the stage seemed shadowy and mysterious. Just inside the door a mass of furniture was piled, as in a warehouse. The air felt damp and held a musty odor. Against lofty brick walls, once painted white, but now gray with accumulated dust, leaned tall, oblong pieces of scenery, waferishly thin, layer on layer, showing flimsy wooden frames and rude canvas backs.

In the center of the stage a scene was being set. Bright lights shone through gaps in the wings, beyond which he saw men rolling out a shaggy green carpet representing grass, placing the painted profile of a hedge, laying down wooden flower beds abloom with milliners' roses, and bracing up the one-sided counterfeit of a large tree-trunk, whose foliage hung on a coarse net, which, as he watched, dropped swiftly from the cavernous dark spaces of the flies.

To Wickett there was something horrible in all this cheap paint-and-canvas imitation of Nature. It

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seemed impossible that, from the front, such a crude collection of junk should even faintly suggest a garden. He felt himself to have entered a place of craziness — a place of crazy things and crazy people: stage hands, working seriously over nonsensical affairs; players, standing about in little groups, their faces painted red, like paper masks; their eyes ridiculously blackened. How could grown-up men and women take this folly, this delirium, gravely?

Stepping over electric cables connected with mad-looking lighting devices, and avoiding sundry slender wooden braces shooting up at an angle from the floor to support the side scenes, Wickett followed the retreating figure of the doorman by a narrow passage between the drop and the rear wall of the building and, emerging at the other side, beheld a bank of long, narrow balconies, one above the other, each giving admission to a row of dressing rooms, the doors of which were ranged at even distances, like those of prison cells.

The doorman, however, did not ascend the iron stairs leading to the upper tiers, but rapped at a tin-sheathed door opening directly from the stage.

“What is it?” came a voice from within.

“’S the ge’l’mun,” announced the doorman.

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"Just a minute," said the voice.

"You c'n wait," the doorman said to Wickett, and went away.

A moment later the door was opened by a colored maid, who invited him to enter. The dressing room was of the size of a very small hall bedroom. Being the best dressing room, it was somewhat larger than the others; and having lately been occupied during a long run by a famous woman star, who had decorated it with cretonne, it was as little like a prison cell as a dressing room may be. Instead of the usual wooden shelf and cheap mirror, it contained a pretty dressing table surmounted by a triptych looking-glass. Two large trunks, two small wicker chairs, a stationary washbowl and a cheval glass completed the principal equipment of the room, save for a vast and heterogeneous array of clothing, which the colored maid now gathered up and stowed away hurriedly behind cretonne curtains, and a litter of grease paints, cold creams, rouges, eye-pencils, powders, powder-puffs, rabbits' feet, and other articles of make-up, scattered over the dressing table in such loose profusion as almost entirely to conceal its surface.

Janie, seated before the table, was leaning toward

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the glass and touching up the painted shadows on her eyelids. Her back was toward him — a finely modeled back, toned to floury whiteness by a heavy coat of powder, and handsomely framed by the wide sash and narrow shoulder straps of black which formed the bodice of her evening gown. As he entered she looked up; the first meeting of their eyes was by reflection in the mirror.

“Shelley!” she exclaimed with a glow of cordiality as, turning quickly in her chair, she gave him both her hands. “I’m so glad to see you!”

He took the hands and shook them warmly. Then for a moment they gazed at each other frankly, kindly, yet critically, as a man and woman will when, having loved and parted, they meet again as friends after a space of years.

“You have n’t changed,” she told him as she dropped his hands.

“Hair’s getting a little gray — just here,” he said, indicating his temples.

“Let’s see.”

He bent toward her.

“Yes; just a touch. It’s *distingué*.”

“And you,” he said — “why, Janie, you’re lovelier than ever. At least I judge so — though I

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can tell better when I've seen you minus war paint. I'm out in front with a friend — chap named Higgins. He's in love with you already. Will you have supper with us afterward?"

"I shall be delighted, Shelley. Of course I'm mad for a good long talk with you."

"Higgins is like one of the family," he said. "I'm sure you won't mind him."

"Of course not," she assented. Then: "But you're married, are n't you? Yes, I remember getting your wedding cards years ago. Is your wife in front?"

"No. She's South. You must meet as soon as she comes home."

"You're happy?"

"Very."

"It must be wonderful to be like that!"

"Then," he ventured, "I take it you are n't — that you have n't ——?"

Janie broke into a laugh.

"Considering certain matrimonial peculiarities of my profession," she suggested, "you wish to inquire tactfully if I have married?" Then, in a more serious tone: "No, Shelley; I have not. Domestic life is practically impossible on the stage. If I ever

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marry I shall leave it; and — well, I've not yet met the man for whom I'd do that."

Wickett, hearing this avowal, was conscious of a feeling that it was somehow peculiarly appropriate. It seemed to him fitting that, meeting her again, he should find her a creature even lovelier than before, a woman obviously to be coveted by men, yet still unwed. But why had she remained so? Not from lack of opportunity; so much the merest glance at her assured. She was adorable. Why, then? Could it be that something of their love of long ago survived in her as more than a mere memory? She had cared for him deeply in the old days. He had cared for her too; but women, it is said (and he had ample reason within his own experience to believe it) are by nature more constant than men. The memory of her — he now recalled — had remained with him as something always fragrant. Was it, then, impossible, especially in view of the acknowledged greater constancy of womankind, that the girl who had wept so passionately at parting with him years before, who had remained unmarried, who had laughed, just now, when he had asked if she were married (and was there not some bitterness about that laugh?) — was it, then, impossible that,

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after all these years, this proud, fascinating woman was even still ——?

The not unpleasant thoughts forming in his mind were interrupted by a rapping on the dressing-room door, and a voice announcing:

“Third act, Miss Vaughan.”

Wickett moved toward the door.

“I’ll run along now,” he said. “We’ll come back for you after the play.”

Janie had risen. The maid was draping a soft scarf about her shoulders.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Wait inside the stage door. I’ll try not to keep you long.”

He bowed in the doorway.

And while his face still showed there, Janie smiled a smile that made him think of sunshine in the spring, raised her fingers to her lips, and tossed him a kiss.

CHAPTER XI

JANIE FINDS A COUNSELOR

STAGE hands were rapidly disposing of the scene of the final act when Wickett and Higgins entered the stage doorway after the performance. Before the scene had altogether melted away, shadowy figures began to emerge from dressing rooms along the various balconies on the opposite wall, descend the iron stairs, traverse the stage and pass out to the street. And sometimes, as a departing player passed, Wickett and Higgins would detect a curious faint resemblance, like a picture blurred and half washed out, to one or other of the characters in "The Divine Dilemma."

True to her word, Janie did not keep them waiting long, but quickly emerged from her dressing room habited in a becoming suit of soft wine-colored cloth, fur-trimmed. Wickett presented Higgins; then the three moved out through the stage doorway.

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"Where would you like to have supper?" Wickett asked her. "Sherry's, perhaps — or the Ritz?"

"Oh, no," said Janie. "If you and Mr. Higgins don't mind I'd like some less fashionable place. I never feel quite well put together when I leave the theater, and to-night I hurried — some of the make-up's probably left on."

"Sullivan's?" suggested Higgins tentatively.

"Just the place! Upstairs, where it's quiet. You see," she explained, "Shelley and I are old sweethearts; we have a lot to talk about. I hope we won't bore you."

"Don't bother about that," said Higgins.

Reaching the corner they turned down Broadway and presently arrived at the eating place Higgins had named — one of the few restaurants on that shifting street which have survived from the old days when Broadway restaurants were free alike from graft and the elaborate horrors of the pseudo-French cuisine; when Broadway waiters, instead of being smirking, spidery little mercenaries, were amiable, awkward Celts, large of body, hand and heart.

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"I know just what I want," declared Janie when they were seated at table—"Welsh rabbit and a great big glass of Pilsener."

"So do I," said Higgins.

Whereupon Wickett, who had been consulting the menu with thoughts of champagne and chicken *à la* King, laid the card down and, protesting that neither the restaurant nor the supper suited his ideas of what an actress was entitled to, gave in and ordered likewise.

Simple though their little party was, it did not lack animation. Even Higgins, who had expected to sit silent, even bored perhaps, while Janie and Wickett talked over old times—that topic usually so dull to him who had no share in the old times—found himself drawn into the conversation. Janie saw to that; for besides the kindness proclaimed by the wide setting of her gentle, humorous blue eyes, she was possessed of tact in such great degree that it was scarcely visible at all.

When she had made Wickett tell her much of Molly and the children, and even of the coffee business, he insisted on hearing something of her own career. It had begun, she told them, in California, half a dozen years ago, when she received a half-

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playful offer from the manager of a stock company. In the same spirit she took it up, appearing throughout one week in the rôle of a maid. Finding the experience amusing, she took another little part the next week and, continuing to enjoy the work, finally finished out the season. Thus, without having quite intended to, she had become an actress. For two years more she played in stock. After that came two years on the road —“ leads in number-two companies ”— and then the present opportunity ; such an opportunity as all ambitious players yearn for : the chance to appear in a good part on Broadway. Nor did her story suffer in the telling. Like every woman gifted with a dynamic sense of comedy, she possessed, also, the mimic quality. Her descriptions of people were not mere descriptions but rather sketches drawn on the surface of her own individuality.

“ So, you see,” she explained, “ it’s a very critical time for me. I’m afraid ‘ The Dilemma ’ ”— so she abbreviated it —“ is going to be a flivver. Most of the critics roasted it and business is n’t very good. On the other hand, I personally seem to have come through pretty well. My notices were favor-

JANIE FINDS A COUNSELOR

able and the management has offered me a five years' contract, guaranteeing at least one Broadway production a year."

"Then," put in Wickett, "I should say that the critical time was past."

Janie shook her head.

"There's a lot of annoying business about it," she explained with a sigh. "I have n't signed the contract yet. There are things in it I don't like; but — well, it seems a big opportunity, and they're pressing me. I don't quite know what to do. To tell the truth, Shelley, I'm not a very good business woman, and I've been wondering if you'd advise me about this contract. Or do you think I'd better see a lawyer about it?"

There was something childlike and endearing in her perplexity.

"I'd be delighted to help, of course," said Wickett; "but a lawyer would be best. And, besides," he added with a smile which included both the others, "I always like to drum up trade for my friend, Mr. Higgins."

"Idiot!" said Higgins genially; but Janie brightened instantly.

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"Oh, are you a lawyer, Mr. Higgins?"

"Not only a lawyer," he said with a smile, "but a very fine lawyer indeed!"

"Oh, I should n't go so far as to say that," Wickett put in. But Janie paid no attention to his jesting. Still looking at Higgins, she asked earnestly:

"Then you will advise me?"

"I'll do anything I can," he said, and immediately changed the subject; nor was it mentioned again until just as they were parting.

After escorting her back to her hotel the two men stood talking with her in the foyer by the elevators for a moment. Wickett was the first to shake her hand and say good night.

"It's been lovely, Shelley," she said. "You must come to see me very soon."

"I shall," he answered in a tone which it seemed to him meant a great deal. Then he turned quickly and moved toward the street.

Janie spoke to Higgins as Wickett moved away.

"Can we have a business talk to-morrow?" she asked, giving him her hand. "I'd like to retain you. That's the word, is n't it?"

He smiled and nodded.

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"Will you lunch with me, here, at one?"

"Delighted."

Janie looked after Wickett, who had already crossed the foyer.

"Shall I ask Shelley to come too?"

"Oh ——" said Higgins.

Her eyes turned back to him.

"You don't think so?"

"Oh, perhaps. I was just thinking we'd be wanting to talk about this contract and —— But just as you wish."

"Come on, Hig!" called Wickett, who, having reached the revolving door leading to the street, had paused there and turned toward them.

"No — as *you* wish." Janie said quickly.

"Thanks, then!" Higgins answered hurriedly.

"Good night."

"Good night," she returned, with a little smile. Then she stepped into a waiting elevator and was gone.

CHAPTER XII

WICKETT WRITES TWO LETTERS

THOUGH it was late Wickett felt wide-awake when he returned to his deserted home that night. He was thoughtful as he made ready for bed; and before putting out the lights he propped himself against the pillows and penciled a letter to his wife. After telling Molly how he missed her, how desolate the apartment seemed without her, and how vacant life would be for him while she was gone, he went on:

I dined with Hig at the club and afterward we went to the theater. Hig had the tickets and I did n't know what we were going to see until we got there. It proved to be a new English comedy, "The Divine Dilemma." The play was pretty much the same old thing; but you'll be interested to hear that Janie Vaughan, of whom you've heard me speak, has the principal part. As I knew her so well when we were youngsters, I felt I ought to look her up if only for old times' sake. And, besides, I was curious to see

WICKETT WRITES TWO LETTERS

whether stage life had changed her much. She seems a good deal older, of course; but she's still a nice girl. Hig was so enthusiastic over her acting that I thought he'd enjoy meeting her; so all three of us went out after the performance and had a Welsh rabbit at Sullivan's. She is quiet, modest and serious about her work — nothing actressy about her. And she was enormously interested in hearing of you and the children. You must meet her as soon as you get back. I'm sure you'll like her.

Having written thus to Molly, he touched again on the subject of his lonesomeness, of how desolate the apartment seemed without her, and how vacant life would be for him while she was gone; and with that closed his letter, put out the lights and, filled with the pious satisfaction of one who having nothing to conceal has not concealed it, went to sleep.

The next night, too, when he returned to his deserted home, he wrote to Molly. But this time he decided, after some reflection, that he would not mention in his letter the fact that he had been for the second time to see the comedy, which, by his own admission of the night before, was "pretty much the same old thing." He felt — so, at least, he put it to himself — that Molly would not understand; no, not even though he were to explain that

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the men with whom he had dined had asked him to suggest a play, and that, thinking only of their pleasure, he had sacrificed himself, suggested "The Divine Dilemma" and thus been forced to sit through it again.

So, though there was no real reason why he should not tell her, and though he would have liked to, he did not. The thought troubled him a little. It had always been a dream of his to tell his wife absolutely everything; but he had discovered, by experiments in that direction, that when a husband tells his wife absolutely everything she immediately guesses all the rest.

On his second visit to the play he did not present himself at the stage door. He thought of doing so, but concluded that it might look better not to, put the thought aside and went home brimming over with the feeling that the world would be a better place if other husbands exercised such self-denial as he had shown. Thus, even though he did not mention "The Divine Dilemma" in his second letter to his wife, he retired that night with a feeling of extraordinary virtue and self-righteousness. That feeling held over to the morning. At breakfast it occurred to him that some reward was due

WICKETT WRITES TWO LETTERS

him for his piety, and before luncheon he decided precisely what the nature of his compensation ought to be. He would take Janie out to supper.

At once he called her up, and when he heard her voice on the wire he was conscious of a sudden and by no means disagreeable quickening of the pulse.

"And it is to be a real supper at a real place this time," he told her when she had accepted. "Something nice to make up for the sawdust party we had the other night."

"If I dress," she warned him, "I'll have to keep you waiting longer."

"I sha'n't mind," he told her; and so it was arranged.

Having seen "The Divine Dilemma" two nights running, Wickett now decided that he would pass a lazy evening, dining downtown rather late, going home afterward to dress, and returning to the brightly lighted district at about the time the theaters were closing. But when, after having dined and dressed in a fashion as leisurely as possible, he looked at his watch, he discovered to his great annoyance that there was yet an hour and a half upon his hands.

Lighting a fresh cigar, he went to the living room

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and, standing by the table, fumbled over several novels left behind for him by Molly. They did not look interesting. Anyway, he did not want to read. He felt restless. He wanted to go somewhere — to get out. He decided to pass the time by walking down to the club, and to that end set forth; but by the time he reached the corner of the block he knew he did not feel like walking.

“Taxi?” suggested an acute chauffeur.

Wickett turned and stepped into the machine.

“Where to, sir?”

He had meant to go to the club. Until this very instant he had thought that he was on his way there. But now, of a sudden, he knew that he was not. He was going to the theater to see Janie in whatever portion of the play remained.

CHAPTER XIII

DINER À DEUX

NEVER in his life, it seemed to Wickett, had he seen a picture so superb as that presented by Janie when she emerged at last from her dressing room. There was, it struck him, something acutely dramatic, too, in the contrast between her finished, fashionable loveliness and the background of the stage — dusty, gray, dismantled. And yet when, a few moments later, he found himself gazing at her across a glowing table in the richly subdued surroundings of a luxurious restaurant, she was, if such a thing might be, more lovely still. He had felt a mild, sustained annoyance over having taken her to Sullivan's the other night. The incongruity of her in such a place offended him. How different, this! How sympathetic and self-effacing the service, how delectable the viands, how soft the carpets, music, lights.

She had much to tell him. Higgins had gone

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over the contract offered by her manager and suggested advantageous alterations, to all of which the manager had agreed.

"It was like a miracle, his being with you the other night," she told Wickett as the caviar was set before them. "It's going to make a difference with the whole of my career — having his advice."

"I knew he was the man for you." He beamed paternally upon her. "Besides being my lawyer he's one of the best friends I have. He'd do anything for a friend of mine."

"Yes," she returned, brimming with gratitude. "He said so."

"He means it."

"So," she said sweetly, "I have you to thank for it all, Shelley."

"Oh, it's nothing," he returned, trying to conceal the pleasure her appreciation gave him. "I only introduced him to you; introduced one dear friend of mine to another. That is n't much — is it?"

"It has meant much to me," she insisted, "especially at just this point in my career. You see they've decided, since I saw you, to close 'The Dilemma' as soon as possible. We began rehears-

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ing a new piece — ‘The Journey’ it’s called — yesterday. We’ll open with it in three or four weeks.”

“That means you’ll be in New York for a long time?”

“All season I hope.”

“I hope so too!” he said fervently. “It would seem awful if you were to go away now — now that I’ve found you again.”

She looked up at him frankly.

“It’s nice,” she said, “to know that you still like me after so many years.”

No emotional display from her could have affected him as profoundly, just then, as did her cool, honest gaze and the even, friendly tone of her voice:

“Like you?” he repeated. “*Like* you! Why, Janie, I can’t realize that there’s been a break at all. It does n’t seem possible. It seems as though we were the same young pair we used to be. It’s as though it all — as though everything had come back!”

He stopped speaking and took a draught of his champagne while the words he had just spoken reverberated in his mind like the echo of something somebody else had said. How beautiful she was in

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her lovely evening gown, the blue of which repeated so exactly the color of her great cool eyes! And how very cool they were. Her composure was perfect. He thanked heaven for that. Doubtless she had not understood what he said — had not realized what he meant.

Through the welter of his perturbed feeling her voice penetrated, sounding calm and very far away. She was telling him about her part in the new play. With an effort of will he succeeded in appearing to attend to what she said. But later, after he had bid her good night at the hotel, only the picture of her, very vivid, clung with him. He felt emotional. What had he said to her in that outburst at the table? He had told her he felt as though the old days had come back. What did that mean? Instantly his memory responded to the question in a vivid flash of recollection. Again he saw the green bench under the syringas at the tennis club, with her sitting there beside him; but the Janie in this picture was no longer the slim young creature in pink tulle — she was a woman in a wonderful blue evening gown; a woman like a lovelier elder sister of her former self.

What had he meant when he had said to her to-

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night that it seemed as though the old days had come back? Had he not loved her in the old days? And if the old days had come back, did not that mean he loved her still? It could mean nothing else. And she had sat and listened, gazing at him steadily with the grave, wondering look of one whose dream comes true.

“That’s what I told her — and it’s so!” he said aloud, dropping to a seat on the side of his bed and fixing his eyes in a vacant stare on the opposite wall of the room. “My God! I’m in love again!”

Then, with a great sigh, he leaned over and pressed the button that put out the light.

Next morning, before going in to breakfast, he looked for a long moment at the photograph of Molly and the children which stood on his mantelpiece, and after breakfast, before going downtown, he went and looked at it again. Somehow it reassured him to look at Molly. She seemed so real. His love for her was like a candle burning always in a deep recess of his heart. It was a calm, steady flame. But Janie! She was a flaring torch within him. And it was of the torch that he was keenly conscious. It shone in the dark places and made

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him feel alive. How long it was since he had felt like that! All day he thought of Janie. All day he wished to telephone to her, to see her.

“But I ought not to!” he assured and reassured himself. “It won’t do!”

Yet she had asked him to run in any time. And it would be so easy to stop off for a minute on the way uptown — so easy and so nice.

“But I must n’t!” he told himself as he left the office to go home; and “I must n’t!” he told himself again as he went into the subway, and as he emerged from it at Times Square, and as, with rapid steps, he walked straight toward her hotel.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REHEARSAL

HAVING become a theatrical lawyer — at least to the extent of looking after certain business matters for a lady shortly to become a star on Broadway — it occurred to Higgins, a few days later, that it would be suitable for him to witness a rehearsal of “The Journey.” Consequently, instead of going to the club according to his usual habit, he presented himself, late one afternoon, at the stage door of the theater in which Janie played.

The doorman, seated as usual on a kitchen chair tilted back against the board wall of the vestibule that formed his kennel, looked up with his habitual hostility but, recognizing Higgins, allowed that expression to be replaced immediately by one of infinite indifference, which was the nearest to civility the doorman ever got.

“Ruhursun’!” he said, nodding his head toward the stage.

Higgins walked in. Inside, the light was rather

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dim. The stage was bare of furniture save for some kitchen chairs distributed at each side and a table and two chairs at the center near the footlights. In one of these chairs sat the manager whose name would presently appear on the billboards as "presenting" Janie, and in the other sat the stage director, holding in his hand a manuscript bound in a light blue paper cover. The chairs in the background were occupied by members of the company. Janie was standing near the table, and a few steps distant from it stood the too-good-looking Englishman who was her leading man. He was expostulating with the stage director:

"But, I mean to say, how can I come on center if I'm the lover, and the husband, who is jealous of me, has just made his exit there? I'd have to run onto him in the hall — what?"

The other pondered for a moment. Then:

"I tell you," he decided, "we'll have the husband exit right, instead."

At that, a middle-aged actor who had been sitting over by the dressing room's rose and approached the table.

"But the right entrance leads to the dining room," he protested mildly. "I can't very well go off

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there, can I, when I'm going to the House of Commons?"

"We'll cover that with a line," explained the stage director. "You can say: 'I'm going out by the side door'—that'll fix it."

"But the audience knows it's the dining room," said the actor.

"Well," said the stage director in a tired voice, "there is n't any reason why there can't be a side door there, is there? I tell you it's all right. And Claire can get it over that you've gone out, by looking out the window, left, and waving to you in the street. See?" Then, turning to Janie, he asked: "Do you get that, Claire?"

She nodded.

"Would n't it be a good touch there if she was to throw him a kiss?" suggested the manager.

"Bully!" said the stage director. "Come on; we'll try it over like that. Everybody ready?"

The middle-aged actor turned the pages of his part, scanning them hurriedly.

"Let's see," he pondered aloud. "I'll have to have my hat and coat. I can take them from a chair. Yes; that will be all right. Where do we begin?"

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"Give him the cue, Miss Vaughan," said the stage director. "The speech about 'Whatever may happen I hope you'll always think of me as one who'—and so on. Just the cue."

"All right," she responded, moving toward the front. Then, in a louder voice she declaimed, "Bla, bla, bla—and a long speech ending with: 'Because you've always been too good for a woman like me.'"

"'Don't say that, dear child!'" the middle-aged actor read elaborately. Then, advancing in a stately manner he leaned and kissed the air near Janie's cheek. "'And now I must go to the House. We shall be sitting late to-night. Do not wait up for me.'" There he paused and looked at the stage director, asking: "Is that where the new line comes in?"

"Yes."

"'I'm going out by the side door,'" he resumed. Then, taking a few steps, he added with the air of an old dotard: "'Good night, my love!'"

Janie had turned slowly, following him with her eyes as he moved off.

"'Good night!'" she said in a tense voice.

Then, as the other went back to his corner and sat

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down, she moved slowly to the opposite side of the stage, stood there for a moment looking down, and threw a kiss at the floor.

"That will be your cue to enter," called the stage director to the leading man—"when she throws him the kiss out of the window. See?" Then, turning to Janie: "Do it again, please—just the kiss."

Again Janie threw a downward kiss, whereat immediately the leading man strode forward from the back. Slowly Janie turned. One hand ascended to her bosom.

"'You!'" she cried. It was the beginning of the "big scene" of the play.

To Higgins the scene explained itself. Janie, the Claire of the play, was the young wife of an elderly Member of Parliament. She had been married to him by her mother before, as one of her own lines put it, she "knew what love was." Then the young novelist, played by the leading man, had—to quote the play again—"come into her life." Through the first and second acts she had fought against temptation; but they had been thrown together constantly, and now, between his passionate appeals and her own guilty longings, she was prepared "to make

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the greatest sacrifice a woman can offer on the altar of true love"—by which apparently the playwright meant to indicate that she would go away with the lover.

Her speech was a long one. The first part of it was designed to get sympathy for her. It was full of self-pity and contrition; but the climax of the speech, and of the play, came only with the last few sentences:

“ ‘ We were made for each other — you and I ! You have told me so ; but until now — until I saw that look come into your eyes — I never felt quite sure. Love has been too strong for us ! Take me ! I am yours to do with as you will ! Since I cannot belong to you under the canons of the church, I give myself into your keeping, now and forever, under the higher law ! ’ ”

The leading man stepped forward and took her in a perfunctory embrace.

“ ‘ At last ! ’ ”

“ ‘ Yes ! ’ ” she continued. “ ‘ I will go away with you now — to-night ! It is good-by to the world, Laurence ! By the day after to-morrow we shall be exiles — forever — in my villa at Lugano ! ’ ”

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When she had spoken the last words Janie turned swiftly toward the two men at the table. They looked depressed.

"It is n't right!" she exclaimed. "The script says, 'With infinite pathos'; but it should n't be pathos. I've felt that all along. It wants fire. Let me try it again."

"Yes," agreed the stage director. "Try fire." Then, to the leading man: "Give her the cue."

"Long speech — then: 'Cherish you for all eternity!'" said the leading man with offhand glibness; and Janie began the speech again.

In the first few lines her voice carried a quality of intense calmness; but, as she continued, passion seemed to mount in her until, toward the last, she spoke in words of flame.

During her first reading of the speech Higgins had listened unmoved. He thought Janie read the lines as well as any one could read them; but it did not seem to him that any rendering, however good, could impart to them the quality of truth. They were not real. They consisted merely of words strung together into phrases, false, feeble cant; but now, as she swung through the speech in the new key he was amazed to find himself responding to it,

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feeling it electrically. It was as though the hackneyed words and phrases had been welded together by the fire she put into them — converted from dead fragments into a vivid, white-hot unit.

Unlifelike as the last lines were, he felt himself strangely moved as she spoke them:

“‘Yes! I will go away with you now — to-night! It is good-by to the world, Laurence! By the day after to-morrow we shall be exiles — forever — in my villa at Lugano!’”

What nonsense! Yet it stirred him.

“Bully!” cried the manager, smiling broad approval.

“That’s the stuff, Miss Vaughan!” exclaimed the stage director, leaping from his chair. “Fire does the trick! You’re going to be immense in this part.” Then, turning to the other players: “Eleven o’clock to-morrow morning!”

Higgins stepped forward to meet Janie as she moved toward the stage door. Her face lighted as she caught sight of him.

“Have you been here long?” she asked.

“Half an hour or so.”

“That was the third-act climax we were trying,” she said. “What do you think of it?”

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He told her how it had affected him.

"As I was sitting there, watching," he said, "it struck me that the written play is like a dead wire. The actor is the current. And it must be just the right kind of current or ——"

"Or the whole thing is short-circuited," she finished for him.

Then, as Higgins had come to talk with her concerning business — so he explained — and as the theater somehow did not seem to be the place for that, he left the building with her and walked at her side in the direction of her hotel. And, as often happened now when he came to see her about business, they did not mention business but talked of other things.

"I've been afraid of that climax," she told him.

"The lines are so false."

"They are false as they're written," he said honestly, "but not as you speak them."

She gave him a grateful smile, and answered:

"You can always be my lawyer if you talk like that."

"I'm not flattering. I'm just judicial."

"Thanks again. But did you ever hear such lines?" She ran over the last speech. "Just think

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of saying things like that! And Lugano! In these English plays the guilty couple always fly to Lugano. No real woman could talk as Claire does! I'm Claire, you know. The lover is a novelist. He's supposed to have some sense. If she talked to him like that he'd say to himself: 'This has been a mistake! I'm not going to run away with a sentimental fool! She'd bore me to death in a week!' He'd be scared out. He'd quit before she got half through that speech."

"Ah, but you have n't heard yourself read it," Higgins said. "And you have n't seen how you look. He would n't quit—not with you. Nobody would. If you ever want to prove that just try it on me. You'll find I'd go to Lugano fast enough."

"I'll remember that," she said as they reached the door of the hotel, "in case I ever want to go to Lugano. Meantime, won't you come in?"

The invitation may have brought to Higgins' mind the business he had come to talk about. At all events he entered and was wafted with her to the upper floor on which she had her snug apartment.

The colored maid who attended Janie at the theater admitted them to the pretty little parlor of the

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suite and, taking Janie's coat and furs, went with them to the adjoining room.

Janie moved to the table by the window and put her face down to a bowl of full-blown pink roses.

"See how beautifully your flowers are keeping," she said; but Higgins' eyes traveled to the mantel-piece.

"Yes," he said, "and I see you've acquired another new embellishment since I was here last."

"Shelley's picture, you mean?"

He nodded, smiling.

"Shelley's a dear. It's lovely to see him again. You know we used to be no end sentimental about each other years ago. He jilted me outrageously — the wretch! I wept for three days, I remember. But he's a dear, just the same — a susceptible dear."

"Exactly that," Higgins agreed with a broadening smile.

"Is his wife nice?"

"Adorable," said Higgins. "And do you know what I promised her — the last thing, just as she was leaving?"

"That you'd look after him?"

"That I'd see he didn't get into any heart en-

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tanglements while she was gone. Do you think I'm going to be able to keep my word?"

"Why not?"

"I just wanted to ask your opinion," he went on, "because I also told Molly that I'd do it even if I had to cut him out myself."

Janie gave him a swift sidelong glance; then, laughing mischievously, she answered:

"Oh, if you put it like that — and if you mean me — of course I advise extreme measures to rescue him."

As she spoke the telephone rang and she took down the receiver.

"Tell him to come up," Higgins heard her say. Then she turned to him: "It's Shelley calling now."

"I'll just run along," said the obliging Higgins, moving to get his hat and coat.

"I wish you would n't."

He glanced at his watch.

"I really ought to," he said. "I have a lot of little things to do and I'm dining out rather early."

He stood for a moment watching her as she crossed the room and touched the button that

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switched on the soft pink-shaded lights. Then there came a rap at the door.

"Shall I?" he asked.

She nodded. He opened the door.

"Why, hello, Hig!" cried Wickett heartily.

"What are you doing up here — eh?"

"Business," Higgins smiled. "Just going."

"Oh," said Wickett. "Sorry." Then in a playful tone he spoke to Janie, who had come forward to greet him: "Is n't he a good little lawyer?"

"He has done a great deal for me," she said.

"That's right, Hig," approved Wickett with an expansive and fatherly air as he helped his friend into his overcoat. "You take good care of her, old man. Anything you do for her you do for me, you know."

"I've not forgotten that," said the lawyer, smiling. Then he turned to Janie: "I'll have the papers up for you to look over in the morning, Miss Vaughan."

The remark might have struck Janie as peculiar — since there were no papers to be looked over — but she received it with solemn equanimity.

"Thank you, Mr. Higgins."

"Good old Hig!" mused Wickett aloud after his

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friend had departed. "He's all business, isn't he."

"Isn't that a good quality in a lawyer?" Janie suggested with gravity.

"Of course," Wickett assented; "but I was thinking that if I were your lawyer I could n't just come in here and talk to you about business, and papers to be signed on the dotted line, and dry things like that. I should think that any man would be bound to have human feelings about a woman like you."

Janie looked abstractedly at the roses, but did not answer.

"By the way," said Wickett presently, "you fixed up your contract last week, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"It's some other matters, then, he's looking after for you now?"

She glanced for a moment toward the window.

"Yes," she said, "some little matters in connection with a villa I've been thinking of — at Lugano."

CHAPTER XV,

A VILLA AT LUGANO

THE world beyond the window had now become quite dark, save for the intermittent flashing, at intervals brief and regular, of a vast electric sign on the roof of a building far up Broadway. Wickett rose and, moving across the room, lifted the lace curtains and watched the glittering advertisement appear and disappear. Then he reached up and shut the heavy draperies.

"Lugano?" he repeated, turning toward her. "What on earth has made you think about a place like that?"

"Villas there are scarce," she said. "You have to pick them up when you can."

"But what do you want one for? For vacations?"

"I don't know. I just want it. I might want to live there if I ever left the stage."

What could she mean? It was merely an attack

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of temperament, he supposed. Artistic people did get wild ideas now and then — he was enough of an artist himself to know that. It troubled him strangely to hear her talk of going away. Impulsively he moved back to the couch and dropped down to his accustomed place at her side.

“Janie,” he said gravely, “I don’t like to hear you talking about going away. You’ve a wonderful career just ahead of you right here in New York. And, quite aside from that, I don’t want you to go. I can’t spare you.”

“You just imagine that,” she said.

“No!”

“Yes, you do,” she insisted gently, “just as you imagined it once before, for a little while, long ago. But you got over it.”

“No, Janie,” he declared intensely; “I did n’t! That’s just it! You were the first woman I ever cared for. I’ve always cared for you. There has never been anything in my life like those old days when we —— Oh, Janie! Think of the country club, and the little green bench, and the syringas! Janie! Janie! I care for you now! You are the one great——”

“You do care?” she repeated, turning and look-

A VILLA AT LUGANO

ing at him with eyes wider and more wondering, it seemed to him, than he had ever seen.

"I do!" he whispered fervently, leaning a little toward her and putting his hand over hers.

"You're sure?"

"How can you ask it, dear?"

"Are you prepared to cherish me for all eternity?"

An expression of something like amazement passed across Wickett's face. Involuntarily he removed his hand from hers.

"Why ——" he began, looking vaguely toward the window; but Janie interrupted.

"We were made for each other — you and I!" she declared, leaning toward him and speaking in a passionate voice. "You have told me so; but until now ——"

"I didn't say exactly that," interposed Wickett, who now was leaning back from her against the arm of the couch.

"But until I saw that look in your eyes I never felt quite sure!" she continued vehemently. "Love has been too strong for us! Take me! I am yours to do with as you will! Since I cannot belong to you under the canons of the church, I give myself

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into your keeping, now and forever, under the higher law!"

"But, Janie," cried Wickett, "be reasonable! This kind of thing can't ——"

Again she cut him off.

"Yes! I will go away with you now — to-night!" she declared in a tone of mounting flame. "It is good-by to the world, Shelley! By the week after next we shall be exiles — forever — in my villa at Lugano!"

As she spoke the last words she had been leaning nearer, nearer. Now, to his horror, she flopped, rather than flung herself, across his shoulder.

Hurriedly Wickett lifted her. Then, rising swiftly and disentangling himself, he stepped back out of her reach. He felt sick, shocked, horrified, afraid. So this was what the stage did to women! It must have been the stage; she had n't been like that as a girl; none of the other women he had known had ever jumped to conclusions as to precisely what he meant when he made love. Evidently there was something about stage life that stripped romance of all its delicacy, all its illusory quality, and left only passion and self-abandonment!

A VILLA AT LUGANO

"We must think of others!" he declared from a safe distance.

For an instant Janie looked at him in silence. Then, raising her handkerchief to her face, she turned away.

"We cannot live for ourselves alone," continued Wickett, praying inwardly that she was not about to have hysterics. "We must learn to bear things, Janie, because of our responsibility to — to — ah — to those near and dear to us, and to — ah — to society at large."

Even as he spoke he felt the inefficiency of his expressions. They sounded trite in his own ears. He felt the need of saying something very fine and soothing and rich in the quality of self-abnegation, but could think of nothing in the least appropriate. The silence became awkward. He felt a mad desire to get away.

Janie rose slowly and, with her face still averted from him, walked to the window, parted the curtains and stood there in an attitude that seemed to him tragic beyond all words, looking out on the night.

Wickett went slowly to the chair near the door

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on which he had left his hat and coat. Taking them up, he moved a few steps toward her. Her back was turned. She did not move.

"Janie," he said in a sad voice, "we are only torturing ourselves! I had better go. Yes, that will be best!"

Still holding her handkerchief to her face with one hand and clutching the window draperies with the other, she turned her head a little and nodded without speaking.

He crossed rapidly to her and lifted his hand as though to place it on her shoulder. Then, on second thought, he dropped it without touching her, deciding it was wiser not to — because you can't tell what an emotional woman will do.

"I only want to say," he told her, "that when we meet again it must be as though — as though this — this scene had never been. We must forget!" Then, having read somewhere in a book about a parting in which a man said to a woman, "very simply," the words, "I am going now," he said them in that way. "Don't you think that will be best?" he appended. The latter sentence was not from the book, but was entirely original with him.

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"Yes," came her voice faintly from behind the handkerchief. "That is best."

"Good-by!" he said, turning. Then, feeling very sorry for her, he added as he reached the door: "Good-by, dear girl!"

As the door closed behind him Janie turned, dropped the hand in which she held the handkerchief, and revealed a face which, far from being tear-stained, held a look sweet, humorous, and perhaps a little reminiscent too; for in her mind there was the recollection of another parting with him long ago, on an occasion anything but humorous. That time she had wept with pity for herself and jealous heartburnings over the girl who had so ruthlessly inveigled him away. How she had hated that girl! She smiled now as she remembered. And after the smile had faded from her face there still remained an expression of good will and gentle mirth — the look of a person who has done a good action in secret and enormously enjoyed doing it.

Her action always was a secret — so secret, indeed, that, though there came a time when she told Higgins almost everything else, she never told him

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of this benefaction, or let him have the smallest hint of how she had proved to her own satisfaction that the unnatural speech she made in the third-act climax of "The Journey" was enough — as she had thought it would be — to drive a man away.

CHAPTER XVI

PROBABLY PIQUE

IN order to keep Shelley in the dark concerning the true nature of her emotional performance on the occasion of her last sight of him, Janie realized that she must prevent his seeing the new play, with its revealing third-act climax.

She telephoned him.

Realizing that it was her voice on the wire, he became nervous lest she were beginning to pursue him, but on that point he was quickly reassured.

"I just wanted to ask you," she said, "not to come to see 'The Journey' at first."

"But I was planning to be at the first night," he said. "I thought Hig and I would go together."

"It occurred to me you might have some such plan," she went on. "That's why I called you up. It's good in you to want to be there, Shelley. But don't you understand how I feel?"

"You mean," he suggested, "that it would make

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you nervous if you realized I was in the audience? ”

“ Well — yes.”

“ But you would n’t want me not to see you in the play at all? You won’t mind my going after it is well under way? ”

“ Not so much, perhaps — if it succeeds. But I’m not sure, even about that. I want you to promise me not to see it until I tell you that I feel differently.”

“ Of course I ’ll promise if that is what you wish,” he answered, feeling very gentle toward her. “ But you ’ll get over that idea, I ’m sure, Janie. You *must*, you know. Molly will be home from Florida in a couple of weeks more. I want her to see you in the play. And we must all get together, of course.”

“ Of course I ’m eager to meet her,” Janie answered. “ But I have your promise not to see ‘ The Journey ’ until I say you may? ”

“ Certainly.”

“ Thanks, Shelley. You ’re a dear.”

Though the critics, as before, dealt kindly with Janie’s performance, they pronounced the new play mawkish — a judgment with which the star herself

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agreed. At the end of one week "The Journey" was withdrawn, an acknowledged failure.

Shelley Wickett never saw it.

That, from Janie's point of view, was one advantage of the failure, but not the only one. The chief advantage lay in the fact that her manager was so disheartened by this second disappointment that, in a moment of depression, he agreed to her proposal that the contract between them be cancelled. For be it noted that, in the eight weeks intervening between the signing of the contract and the failure of "The Journey," the ambitions, even the immediate plans, of the star had undergone a change unexpected and extreme.

Janie had always said that domestic life was practically impossible on the stage. She had always known that if she ever married she would leave the stage. And now, at last, in the person of the lawyer who had drawn the contract which might have made it difficult for her to abandon her career, she had met for the first time a man for whom she was willing to do so.

The engagement was announced a few weeks after Molly Wickett's return from Florida. And some months later, in the Wicketts' living-room, with

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Shelley as best man and Molly as matron of honor, the beautiful Janie Vaughan became Mrs. Archibald Framingham Higgins.

Even then, Shelley had no suspicion of the truth about that poignant scene that he had had with Janie. No one hoped more than he that the match would turn out well. And he believed it would. Higgins was no Adonis, but he was true blue. And steady. Steadiness, it seemed to Shelley, was a quality very essential in the make-up of any man who should marry Janie. So that much was all right. As for Janie — well, he could never forget that she was an old sweetheart of his. He would always be fond of her. No less for her sake than for dear old Hig's he would try to obliterate from his mind the memory of her one wild moment; to regard it as something that had never been.

But before finally abandoning the memory to oblivion, he presented himself with one harmless little bit of consolation. It was only a thought. And the thought was that this marriage, which old Hig so plainly and jubilantly regarded as a triumph of his own, and which promised so well for the future, was, nevertheless, in all probability, the result of pique.

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Even after Shelley had forgotten where the feeling came from, even after the memory of that twilight scene in the hotel had been practically abolished from his mind, even then there remained with him, as a residuum left by the experience, a certain caution he had never known before.

Women, he now definitely understood, were emotional. That was true even of very fine women, like — well, like *any* fine woman; he was n't thinking of any woman in particular. No. It was just a general truth — a good one for a man to recognize. You could n't be sure what a woman would do. Emotionally aroused any woman was dangerous.

Whether or not it was this philosophy alone which kept him in the path of piety for the next two years, would be difficult to say. He himself was at times disposed to think that advancing age was responsible for the phenomenon. The thought was not pleasant to him — especially in the springtime. Could it indeed be that, with the late thirties, a man would settle down to a state of sweetly monotonous, permanent, marital placidity? In a way, of course, he hoped so; but in another way he most fervently hoped not.

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And then when he was thirty-nine years old, and the future looked quite hopeless in the matter of divertissement, came the Morvens' invitation to Molly, and her six weeks' trip with them, and his curious, unconventional meeting with Maida Greenwood.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ENNOBLING INFLUENCE

WICKETT was in the midst of one of his long telephonic chats with Maida Greenwood when his wife's telegram was brought in by the office boy and laid upon the desk before him. He found the coincidence distasteful.

"Of course we can dine out if you really want to," Maida was saying in reply to the suggestion he had made, "but would n't you rather have dinner at our little table in my studio window? I'm sure you know I love to cook for you."

While she was speaking Wickett's eye took in the typewritten dispatch. It was dated San Francisco, and read as follows:

SHELLEY WICKETT

WICKETT COFFEE CO 11 BROADWAY N Y

LEAVING THIS AFTERNOON DUE NEW YORK

TUESDAY 5 P M TRIP DELIGHTFUL EXCEPT FOR

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YOUR ABSENCE EAGER FOR HOME LOVE TO YOU
AND CHILDREN MOLLY

9 26 A M

A sigh escaped him. It was such a sigh as might come from a man who in his partner's absence has speculated with the firm's funds and who has just been told his margin is exhausted. And that, figuratively, was precisely Shelley Wickett's situation. He had been gambling, though not with money or in Wall Street. While his domestic partner was away he had once more taken a flyer in Sentimental Adventure Preferred, and, as usual, had got in deeper than he had intended. And now his wife was coming home and he must manage to—to arrange things somehow.

"What's the matter, Shelley?" came Maida's gentle voice over the wire.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You sighed."

"Did I? It was a happy sigh, then. I was thinking how much nicer your studio will be than a restaurant. Only I'm ashamed of my selfishness at letting you get dinner for us again to-night. It makes the third night running."

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"But you're not selfish! You know I love to have you here. What time will you come?"

"About seven."

"I'll have dinner ready at seven sharp."

Wickett smiled as he hung up the receiver. He knew that dinner would not be ready when he got there. It never was. That was a part of the pleasure of it. She would come running to the door in the blue smock, daubed with paint, that served her as an apron for the practice alike of the graphic and domestic arts, and having admitted him would scamper back to the kitchenette, explaining over her shoulder, as she went, how she had intended to be ready when he came but how this-and-that had happened to delay her. Though he had known her not quite six weeks he was already well aware that this-and-that were always happening to Maida. Then he would go and lean against the door jamb while she cooked — there was room for but one person within the kitchenette; and occasionally he would be allowed to help by getting something from the tiny ice box or the shelf of the little hall closet called by courtesy the pantry. She would be sweet and serious and busy over the small gas stove with its blue flame licking at the sides of pots and pans

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from out of which came bubbling sounds and steam and appetizing smells. He would be idle, amused, admiring — yes, and a little in the way. He found it curiously delightful to be just a little in her way when she was cooking; the propinquity, the informality, the sense of intimacy thrilled him; it was sweet even to be shooed aside with mock severity when one knew well that it *was* mock severity — that she much preferred one in the way than out of it.

His prevision proved accurate in detail. It was a quarter past seven when he reached the summit of four flights of stairs that led to Maida's little studio apartment, yet there he found the smock, the haste, the breathless explanations of her tardiness, the smell of dinner in the making, the pleasurable interval of loafing near her in the doorway while she, so pretty and preoccupied, completed preparation of the meal.

Never before had he been so acutely conscious as to-night of Maida's strongly individual charm, of his fondness for her, of the dimensions to which, in the space of a few weeks, had grown the bond between them — the thing they spoke of as their friendship. It had taken Molly's telegram to bring

THE ENNOBLING INFLUENCE

him to some realization of matters as they stood — and as they could no longer stand when Molly was at home again.

That was the awkward part of it. He had not got deliberately into this entanglement. On the contrary, until Molly's wire came he would n't have called it an entanglement at all. He had n't thought of it in that light; nor, for the matter of that, in any other light. It was not something weighed, measured, considered in advance. It was not even, in his view, something he had done. It was a matter of chance, like being struck by a falling piece of cornice or finding a hundred-dollar bill or catching influenza. Neither he nor Maida was to blame.

Blame? Why was he thinking about blame? Their friendship, though undeniably idyllic and intense, was perfectly proper — perfectly. Being congenial they had simply fallen into the way of spending much time together, of seeing each other daily. But why should they not do that — especially considering the sort of girl that Maida was? She was fine; very, very fine! Her influence upon him was ennobling. Could such an influence produce resentment in any reasonable wife?

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Blame? Well, if there was any blame to place, Molly must not put it all on him — or Maida. She ought to bear her share. Had she not gone off on a six weeks' junket to California with the Morvens in their private car? To be sure, she had hesitated to accept the invitation; to be sure, also, she had gone only because he urged her need of rest and change. It was right for her to go; he was not disputing that. But the fact remained that she had gone, and that, so doing, she had left him all this time at loose ends in New York. Under the circumstances what was he to do? Surely she did not expect him to lead a life of gloomy isolation while she was faring through the golden West? Obviously not; for she herself had sent him to the charity bazaar.

That was another point not to be ignored. Though Molly had not as yet so much as heard of Maida, nevertheless, in one way of looking at it, you might say it was through Molly that he and Maida had met; for if Molly had not left the tickets, requesting him to use them, he would not have gone to the bazaar; and had he not done that, he would now be no more aware of Maida's existence than Molly herself was.

Finding comfort in this line of reasoning, he fol-

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lowed it, perceiving more and more clearly his wife's responsibility. Yet at the same time he realized dimly that for him to perceive it was one thing, and that to induce her to perceive it might be quite another. Women are so emotional. Everybody knows that they are governed not by cold logic, but by their feelings. And wives are women plus. To make them see a thing like this in the right light, one must lead them along slowly, showing them step by step the progression of facts. And that is difficult to do — wherefore it is the tendency of husbands not to try. Wickett had not tried. Subconsciously he had for some time been troubled by this fact; now it began to trouble him acutely. There was no question about it, he ought to have prepared the way a little with his wife. Yes, and with Maida too.

Of course he had made it a point to tell Maida he was married. He was not one to sail under false colors, especially with such a girl. He had gone out of his way to indicate his matrimonial bonds on the evening he met her; bringing it into the conversation rather gracefully, he flattered himself, by saying that he must not fail to take his children down to the bazaar, since their mother was spending a few

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weeks in California. Two or three times since then he had repeated the mention of his wife; once, for instance, when he took, as a gift to Maida, two out of a dozen cans of ripe olives Molly had shipped home; and again when he told her that the lamp shade was to be one of Molly's Christmas presents from him.

Still, he felt he had not said enough. He had not been sufficiently explicit. He feared that he had failed to make it clear enough that Molly and he were on the best of terms; that they were not in the habit of leaving each other for weeks at a time like this; that she had gone reluctantly, and only because she was worn out with long unbroken duty in the triple rôle of housekeeper, wife and mother.

Not that he had, in his own view, given Maida the least reason to suppose that he and Molly might not be in full accord. Heaven forbid! His failure had not been upon the negative but upon the positive side. He had done nothing to give her a false impression, but he was beginning to fear that he had not, perhaps, done enough to give her an unmistakably accurate impression. Little revealing utterances of hers had of late disturbed him with their vague implications. Did she expect things to go on

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like this? Once or twice when they had spoken of the delightful quality of their companionship instinct had hinted to him that Maida might be treasuring, down in her heart, the illusion that she filled a want in his nature that his wife failed to fill.

In a sense, of course, that was true; but not in the sense she might suppose. Charmed as he was by her, Wickett realized perfectly that the want she filled was merely that of a lonely husband for sweet, sympathetic and, if you like, gently sentimental companionship. It had been lovely. He was very fond of Maida. He hoped they always might be friends. But he hoped also that she understood that this phase of the affair — this very urgent phase — was temporary, and would soon be over.

But how, pray, is one to make a lovely, sensitive, proud girl see a thing like that? To be blunt would be to ruin a relationship ineffably beautiful and delicate. Unthinkable! Fancy seeing a girl like Maida day after day, dining with her, either at home or in a restaurant, every evening for ten days running, as he had done, and breaking in at intervals with some such statement as, "You should keep continually in mind while we are enjoying these little *parties à deux* that I love my wife and that she loves me.

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You must not allow yourself to become enamored of me, but must understand that, charming as you are, you are merely a stop-gap."

Expressed in that way, the very thought was, of course, grotesque; but even if it were expressed quite differently, if it were indicated with the utmost tact, the priggishness, the banality, the awful awkwardness of the essential meaning could not be obscured.

How he loathed awkwardness in matters of this kind! There came to him unpleasant recollections of Mrs. Railey and a Mrs. Brundage. With both of them he had tried to avoid initial awkwardnesses, only to become involved later in awkwardnesses infinitely more extensive. At the memory of Mrs. Railey he winced; at that of Lena Brundage he shuddered. By trying to spare her feelings he had got into a fix from which his wife — dear, sane, wise Molly — had finally been obliged to extricate him. How ashamed he had been! And even Molly did n't know that at their final meeting the high-strung widow had shrieked and flung a hairbrush at him.

But Maida! Maida, whose instincts were so refined, so sweet, so gentle! Was Maida to be likened

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to a woman such as that? A thousand times no! There was but one resemblance between this affair and that old repulsive memory, and that resemblance had to do entirely with the course he had pursued. In either instance Molly had been kept too long in ignorance of what was going on.

In his gratitude to Molly after the escape from Mrs. Brundage he had vehemently insisted that there would be no recurrence of that particular mistake. If in future he felt himself caught in an eddy of incipient adventure he would own up. It would be difficult, but he would do it. However, time had softened the determination. And now, here he was again, with a well-developed case and the likelihood of large, uncomfortable explainings looming imminent before him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MYSTIC

IN the beginning he had fully intended to tell Molly about Maida. He had thought of it several times on the evening they had met. Yet next day, when writing to his wife, he had not mentioned the experience of the night before. And why not? Simply because, though he had seen Maida but once, the story was already a rather awkward one to tell — awkward because the facts would leave a false impression.

Fancy, for instance, writing to one's wife:

As you requested me to do, I went to the bazaar to look for Christmas presents. At the lamp-shade booth I fell into conversation with a very nice girl, and finally bought a large parchment shade, which she had painted with figures of Harlequin and Columbine, paying thirty dollars for it. While conversing I happened to learn that she had gone without her dinner because they were short-handed at the booth, and as it was then nearly ten, and business was letting up,

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I insisted on taking her to the café at the end of the corridor for sandwiches and coffee. Naturally we talked at table; I discovered that she was interested in psychic matters and that there was a fortune teller at the bazaar. So after supper we went and had our fortunes told. And then, as it was near closing time and everyone was going home, and as I had to have a taxicab to take away my lamp shade, and as she was such a nice girl, and as we had got along so pleasantly, I asked to drive her home. And she permitted me to do so. And there's nothing more to tell, except that I have an engagement to call at her studio and look at some of her other work.

That, lacking though it did certain vivid little details, nevertheless represented the bald story — the story he had failed to tell his wife. And why had he failed to tell it? Because he felt that, recount it in what words he might and with what elaborations, explain as he might that Maida was not a flirt, but a beautiful free spirit untrammelled by convention, try as he might to show how naturally one thing had led to another, how perfectly proper everything had been — nevertheless, the modifying points would all be brushed aside by Molly. To her the outstanding facts would be merely that he had scraped up an acquaintance with a girl — just a girl — who was of

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course pretty, whatever else she might or might not be; and that she had proved to be the sort of girl who under such circumstances would let a man — just a man — take her to supper, to a fortune teller, and then home in a taxicab.

Having failed to face the music at the outset, he had thereafter taken the easy way, never mentioning Maida at all in his letters to his wife, excusing the dereliction with vague half thoughts to the effect that when Molly came home and met Maida it would be all right, because then she would see what a very nice girl she really was.

Now, however, the situation appeared to him in a very different light. For though the niceness of Maida had, in his opinion, become even more obvious as time went on, it was also more obvious, now, that he and Maida were exceedingly good friends.

Consider the single fact that they addressed each other by their given names. How could he have foreseen that such a thing was going to happen, and so soon? Such rapid progress was, so far as he could remember, unprecedented in his experience. But that, far from being a mitigating circumstance

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in Molly's eyes, would only make things worse. From her point of view the facts would amount to this: That he was calling by her first name a young woman of whom she had never before heard — and of whom she knew he had never heard six weeks earlier.

That, moreover, was far from being the only difficulty he now foresaw.

Having found each other so congenial, having met with such frequency in the past few weeks, they had quite naturally accumulated a store of little memories, little understandings, little playfulnesses, to which they were in the habit of frequently alluding. The thought now came to him that it would be like Maida — child of Nature that she was! — to hark back no less frankly to these intimate little items when Molly should be present; and that, with Molly there to hear and interpret, he would no longer find such references pleasing.

He had given Maida small presents — a set of *de Maupassant*, an electric toaster, a table for her bedside on which to set the telephone, and a cocktail shaker. He had invented a cocktail and named it for her; and she, in turn, had devised an appetiz-

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ing dish, consisting of eggs, tomatoes and minced ham, which, because he liked it, she had called "Eggs Shelley."

Then, too, there were the things the fortune teller had told them. He would not wish Molly to know about all that.

To be sure, he and Maida in speaking, now and then, of what the fortune teller said, had not at first assumed to take it very seriously; yet Wickett noticed that Maida remembered very definitely certain sayings of the mystic, to which he had given hardly a second thought; and he was beginning to wonder whether she, perhaps, attached too much importance to them.

Maida was superstitious. That was one of the first things he had discovered concerning her more intimate self. She had scruples against drinking from a glass held in the left hand; against spilling salt without immediately counteracting evil results by throwing some of the spilled salt over the left shoulder; and against the use, by more than two smokers, of the same match. She would cross the street rather than walk under a ladder, and she believed firmly in the ill report attaching to Friday and the number thirteen.

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On the other hand, certain things were lucky omens. A black cat crossing one's path signified good fortune; collected bubbles on tea or coffee meant money; Thursday was — for her, at least — a lucky day; and any multiple of seven a lucky number — particularly fourteen.

The last two points had been significantly emphasized by the fortune teller — a nondescript brown foreigner who, from his bronze skin and shrewd black eyes, might have been anything from an Armenian to a Hindu — for it so happened that the night on which they met and visited his booth at the bazaar was that of Thursday — lucky Thursday — and that when, at his request, they had counted the letters making their respective names, they discovered that each name contained fourteen letters.

It was Shelley's recollection that the fortune teller had not promulgated, until after this discovery, his dictum concerning the beneficent properties of seven and its multiples, but Maida insisted he had spoken of it before the particular application of it to their case had been revealed. Anyway, she asserted, every one knew that fourteen was a lucky number, and that seven was a mystic one. Did n't almost everything go by sevens? Were n't there the seven

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days of the week, and the seven ages of man, and the seven seas, and sabbatical years for professors; and was n't it a notorious fact that a seventh son of a seventh son was the favorite of fortune?

Nor was that all the fortune teller's lore. By the science of numbers, the reading of the stars, and other occultisms, Destiny, it would appear, had linked them. For example, Maida was twenty-four years old and Shelley thirty-nine; twenty-four and thirty-nine make sixty-three — another multiple of seven. Also, it was disclosed that his birthday fell in April and hers in December.

These months, the mystic told them, enjoyed a peculiar astrological affinity; for whereas December people were, as he expressed it, "harmonious" with those born in August, November or April, those who, like Wickett, had entered the world under the sign of Aries, were "harmonious" with the persons of one month and one month only; and that was December, Maida's month.

When, more recently, Maida had reminded him of all these points, Wickett had been disposed to contend that a fortune teller would be altogether likely to attempt to link the destinies of any man and

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woman who had come to him together ; but at this Maida triumphantly produced a book on astrology in which the April-December theory was set forth in print — which, according to her, proved that it was true.

CHAPTER XIX

IN MAIDA'S STUDIO

“**D**O you know what day this is?” Maida asked, looking at him significantly when, dinner being at last ready, they were seated at the little table in the studio window.

“Thursday,” he replied.

“Yes, but what Thursday?”

He pondered and was unable to discover that it was any special Thursday.

“Five weeks ago to-night,” she reminded him, “you came to the bazaar.”

“Why, of course!” Then, after a moment’s reverie: “You’ll not misunderstand when I say it seems longer than that.”

She nodded. “Yes, longer in one way — that is, we’re like old friends. Yet in another way it does n’t seem long at all. It might have been last week, it’s all so fresh in my mind.”

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"Is it? What single thing do you remember best about it all?"

"Our visit to the fortune teller," she replied. "I don't believe I have forgotten anything he said. Is n't that what you remember best?"

"No," he answered; "when I think of that evening it is somehow the drive down here that I love to remember."

"Why?"

"Oh," said he, "I did n't need any occult gentleman to tell me that you and I were — were congenial; that we understood each other instinctively. I knew that by the way you told me about how you had come on from Centreville to study art, and how you could n't bear to go back, and how when you had completed your course at the Forum you took a studio and branched out for yourself."

"But you asked me about myself," she interjected.

"Yes — and you told me.

"And then," he continued, "I was perfectly delighted at the way you accepted my proposal that we go to the café. It was an unconventional thing for me to suggest, and for you to do. But you were n't coy about it as so many girls would have

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been; you just came along naturally and easily like the bully little chum you are. And I'll never forget the way you looked up as we were going to the café, and smiled at me and said, 'I think we might as well know each other's names.' "

"I liked your name," she said in a softly reminiscent voice.

"And I liked yours. Do you know what it made me think of? What you made me think of? For you match your name."

"What?"

"Have n't I ever told you?"

"I don't believe so. I don't know. Anyway ——"

"Of a spring day," he said. "You may be a December girl, Maida, but your eyes are April eyes — the blue of the sky on an April day. And the gold strands in your hair are like shafts of sunlight piercing April clouds. And that loose way you have of doing up your hair — so unstudied — I thought to myself: 'It's like a crown tossed upon her head by April winds.' "

"What lovely ideas!" she said. "They're like little poems."

"Are they? Well, do you know I always

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thought until that night that I liked marcelled hair? Yes. I imagine I do still — for the ordinary woman. But you're a type, Maida. That's the point. You can wear your hair as you do for the same reason you look so fetching in that old paint-covered smock of yours; or "— for having finished with her cooking Maida had slipped off the smock — "in that absolutely plain silk dress you have on, without any flumdiddles at the neck and shoulders, you know."

"But you haven't told me yet why you think most about driving me home that night."

"I was coming to that. The longer we were together the less I wished to leave you. It wasn't only that I was lonely and that I had begun to — to appreciate you, but that the whole experience had been so stimulating. I had n't felt like that in years. I felt young and alive, and full of the spirit of delicate adventure. Remember, Maida, I'm thirty-nine."

"Oh, it is n't the years, Shelley. Your spirit will always be young."

"I don't know about that. I was feeling positively venerable when I went down to the bazaar that evening. Then along you came, and — well, I

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can only say that the illusion of youthfulness at thirty-nine is in a way more wonderful than youth itself; just as Indian summer, having autumn as a background, can be more wonderful than actual June."

"But you're talking like an old man!"

He looked at her with a little smile that was not too happy. Then he said cryptically: "I suppose I'm getting ready to be old again."

"Oh, no!"

"At all events," he continued, "I felt almost violently that I did n't want to leave you, yet I could n't see how I was to avoid it. It seemed that, according to life's normal way, I must part with you simply because there was nothing further to prevent it. That was the natural course of events. And one thing that makes life generally dull is that it is so infernally full of the natural course of events."

"When I asked to drive you home I was frightened — really frightened, Maida — rather in the way a young man is frightened when he proposes to a girl. And when you met me on my own ground, when you took it so much as though it were a matter of course — though we both knew it was n't — then I felt ecstatic. We were Harlequin and Columbine

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that evening — like the Harlequin and Columbine you had painted on the lamp shade I bought. Do you remember what a bulky package it made, resting on my knees in the taxi? Do you remember it had rained earlier in the evening, and how the Fifth Avenue street lamps were reflected on the wet asphalt? I don't recall what we talked about, except that I was determined that when we reached your door and said good-night it was n't going to be good-by, and that I kept fishing until you said I could come in next day and look at some other lamp shades."

"That was my commercial instinct," she said teasingly.

"And then," he went on, heedless, "I just sat back and reveled in the experience — yes, in the very smell of that musty old taxicab. I don't know just why, Maida, but the transition from that riot of noise and color in the bazaar to the seclusion of that ramshackle, night-prowling public vehicle — with you — was one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me."

"I understand," she said.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "that's it! You understand. You always understand. That is what has made the whole thing so beautiful. That's how

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you've made a sort of little heaven for me here, these last few weeks. I've felt that I could come as often as I wanted, that I could make myself at home — as I've done — and that you'd understand. You can't imagine how I've come to love this place of yours, Maida!"

He stopped speaking and allowed his eyes to wander over the large, disordered room, from the airy space beneath the skylight overhead, which marked the place as the abode of art, to the heterogeneous array of furniture, and of minor objects with which the top of everything that had a top was littered — the carved Italian chair with a mandarin's coat thrown over it and an ultra-modern hat of French blue lying on the seat; the large easel, and the little table beside it, covered with pencils, pens, pads, brushes, pieces of crayon and charcoal, bottles of India ink and twisted tubes of paint; the big rug-draped couch with its many pillows, and his overcoat, hat and cane thrown down upon it; the bookcase, piano, mantel shelf, and above all the large mission table at the center of the room — all their horizontal surfaces overflowing with small things; books, sheet music, drawing and writing materials, photographs framed

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and unframed, a fur neckpiece, vases, lamps, tea-cups, candy and cigarette boxes, statuettes, gloves, brass candlesticks, and bowls and ash trays containing cigarette ends. Were this the drawing-room of a conventional household, Wickett thought, the gray-tinted walls might be said to need doing over, for they were cracked and dusty and showed occasional discolored patches where pictures had been taken down; but here, in Maida's studio, one liked all that, just as one liked the casual way in which a medley of Japanese prints, sketches, posters and broadly painted unframed canvases were scattered over the walls.

"If I came in here a stranger," he said, "I'd know it all belonged to you."

Turning back to her as he spoke he was startled at discovering that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Why, Maida!" he exclaimed. "What is it?" She smiled and shook her head.

"Nothing, except — you've been talking poetry."

Wickett was astonished, touched, mystified. It seemed to him that he had merely been reflective, reminiscent. The thought that he had been making love to Maida did not cross his mind. It did occur to him now, however, that the agreeable and some-

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what tender retrospections in which he had been indulging had created an atmosphere ill suited to his project of mentioning, this evening, the imminence of his wife's return, and of indicating certain — certain little changes that must necessarily ensue. Why had he started talking about that night at the bazaar? And why had Maida for the first time shown emotion? It was unfortunate. Nevertheless, Molly was already hours on her way East. Maida ought to know that. She had a right to know it. And though he hoped she fully realized the difference that Molly's return was going to make, he felt he could no longer risk the chance that she did not.

More awkwardness! He sighed heavily.

"What's the matter, Shelley? That's the second time to-day you've sighed like that."

"Is it?"

"Yes; once over the telephone this morning. You're troubled about something."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know it. I can tell."

"But how can you tell?"

"Oh," she replied, smiling at him as with a ball of handkerchief she dabbed the last vestige of the

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tears from her eyes, "I suppose it's because you were born in April and I in December."

"Well," he said, determined to attack the situation, "you're right, anyway. I am a little troubled." Then realizing that it would n't sound well to say that he was troubled because Molly was coming home, he tried to modify the statement by adding: "That is, you're right in a *way*."

"Has your worry anything to do with me?"

Then as he hesitated she proclaimed: "It has. I knew it!"

"What makes you think so?"

"I can't say. I just seem to know. Tell me what it is, Shelley."

"I got a telegram to-day. My wife is coming home." His eyes avoided hers.

"I thought so."

"You thought so?"

"Yes. You had already received the telegram when we were talking over the telephone this morning, had n't you?"

"Yes. But, Maida! How on earth ——?"

She regarded him solemnly, saying: "Have you forgotten that the fortune teller said I was inclined to be psychic?"

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Wickett stared.

"I had forgotten," he said.

"He told me to follow my instincts — don't you remember? — especially in cases where I vibrated on the same plane with some one else — that my instincts would invariably be right."

"The same plane?"

"Yes. You and I vibrate on the same plane, Shelley. He said so. Haven't you felt it all along?"

"I've felt that we were awfully good — good pals," he said.

"Perhaps that's only another way of putting it."

"Perhaps. And when Molly gets home I want you to know each other and be bully good friends, you know, and — and all that. I'm so awfully fond of you, you know, Maida. And Molly — she's no end of a good sort. Really. I know you'll — you'll like her. And of course she'll like you enormously. Naturally she will. And she'll appreciate how bully you've been to me while she was away. I really don't know what I'd have done without you. And as soon as our place is in work-

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ing order again you'll come up for dinner with us, won't you? And Molly will come down and see the studio and all; and then ——"

"It will be nice for your children to have their mother at home again," put in Maida. Wickett was thankful to her for saying something. He was conscious of having talked rapidly and loosely — like something wound up. He had wanted to stop, but he had n't quite known how.

"Yes," he returned, "they'll be awfully glad to see her." Then feeling that that alone was not quite adequate he appended: "Naturally, we'll all be glad." And having said that, and fearing that it sounded just a little thoughtless, just a little inconsiderate of Maida, he amended still further, saying: "Except that I'll miss these little twosomes of ours. I'll miss them a lot. I'm sure you know that." And though that did n't sound right to him, either, he let it stand. One can't go on amending one's remarks forever.

"Don't explain, Shelley," she said very gently. "You don't need to. You may be sure I understand." Somehow, he did n't quite know why, there seemed, now, to be an implication of a deep significance in her assertion of her understanding.

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It troubled him. He desired to be sure that she had gauged accurately the sense of what he had been trying to communicate.

"The point is," he said, "that, to put it bluntly, I — I ——"

She smiled at him tenderly.

"I can say it better than you can, I think. The point is that you want to be chivalrous. Is n't that it?"

"Well — yes," he admitted, supposing that she meant, "You want to be chivalrous to *me*."

"Now," he thought to himself with infinite relief, "everything is comfortably fixed. She does understand."

That night as he went home, and again each time he thought the matter over in the next few days, he congratulated himself upon having adroitly handled an awkward situation. For is it not as difficult, when one considers it, to tell the other woman about one's wife, as to tell one's wife about the other woman?

CHAPTER XX

A RECITAL

NOT at any time had there been in Wickett's mind a moment's doubt as to the sincerity with which he looked forward to his wife's return. Certain subsequent accountings he did not, to be sure, anticipate with pleasure; but having planned with much care the precise manner in which these accountings should be made, in order to produce the least unfavorable impression, and being, moreover, of habitually optimistic nature, he was in a cheerful frame of mind, even with regard to these possible embarrassments, as he went to the station to meet her.

How glad, how very glad he would be to see her he had not fully realized until, walking rapidly down the concrete platform toward the rear of a long express train which had just rolled slowly in, he saw Molly step from the Morvens' car.

Molly! His own fine, open-hearted, lovely, level-

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headed Molly, with her clear, candid eyes like those of a Madonna, yet so capable of showing humorous appreciation, too, upon occasion. What a lucky dog he was to have a wife like that! Yes, and how unworthy. What in the name of common sense was it that turned him every now and then into a philandering fool? At the sight of her a window seemed to open in his soul admitting a great gust of purifying feeling, as when a long unventilated room, filled with the smoke of cigarettes and Chinese punk, is suddenly thrown open to the sun and wind.

The children, whom he had taken down to meet her, rushed forward crying, "Mother! Mother!" and a moment later all four of them were reunited in a family embrace.

No need to ask if the trip had done her good. She was radiant — ten years younger in appearance than when she went away.

That evening they celebrated her return by having supper with the children, after which she told in glowing words of the trip — the horseback ride through the Yosemite, the redwoods, the festivities in San Francisco, the Seventeen Mile Drive, and house parties at Burlingame and Pebble Beach.

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In accordance with the plan that he had formulated Wickett refrained that evening from mentioning Maida. His first impulse, when he had something to confess, was to do it as soon as possible and get it over with; but the thought had come to him, as he pondered the present problem, that to rush immediately into explanations would be to advertise the fact that the subject of those explanations was uppermost in his mind; whereas, by waiting a day and then beginning with some such phrase as, "Oh, by the way," he hoped to make the tale he had to tell seem casual.

His plan was exceedingly complete. It included maneuvers designed to bring Molly to the proper frame of mind, and details as to the proper time and place for the confession.

He began now to pave the way.

"Don't make any engagement for to-morrow afternoon," he said. "I have some tickets for a recital."

"A recital!" Her tone expressed the amazement that she felt. "You mean you're going to take me?"

"Yes, of course," he said, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone.

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He had not realized that she would be so much surprised. She was staring at him with a look of puzzlement amounting almost to alarm.

"What kind of a *recital*?"

"Piano. Rubinovich in a Brahms program."

"Brahms?" she echoed, the depth of her mystification increased.

"Yes. You've always liked Brahms."

"I did n't know you even knew it."

"Of course I knew it."

She continued to gaze at him with that curious look. Never before had such a suggestion come from him. Her musical life had been led apart from her husband, save when he had been obliged to escort her to the opera, and on the one occasion, years ago, when he had voluntarily taken her to a symphony concert to celebrate her recovery after the birth of little Shelley. But a piano recital! And Brahms! What could it mean?

"Well, it's dear of you!" she exclaimed, preferring, wifelike, to believe as long as possible that the extraordinary manifestation constituted a disinterested act of devotion.

"I'm glad you're pleased," he replied virtuously.

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"I am — enormously. But how did you — what gave you the idea?"

"Naturally," he returned, "I wished to celebrate your homecoming."

"Dear boy!" she said, and kissed him on the top of his head.

Wickett felt that he had reason to be well pleased with the result of this preliminary operation. It was, of course, a part of the plan. After the Brahms recital it was his intention to propose that they stay downtown, dining at a quiet little French restaurant, a favorite place of theirs. Then, having plied her with the sort of music and the sort of viands she liked best, when they had sipped their claret and drunk their after-dinner coffee, and he had lighted a Corona — then he would watch for an opening for his, "Oh, by the way, Molly, there's some one I want to have meet you when we can arrange it."

Next afternoon he managed to endure the incomprehensible recital by continually reflecting that Molly at his side was clearly enjoying it, that they were to have a good dinner, and that his propitiatory plans had so far worked without a hitch. So,

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too, a little later at dinner. They sat side by side upon an upholstered seat, back to the wall, whence they could inspect the other diners, while enjoying their own repast. From every point of view it was as perfect a little dinner as he could have wished. And when with the coming of the coffee Molly chanced to speak of some Californians she had met, saying they had promised to let her know when, later in the winter, they came to New York, Wickett felt confident that the gods were helping him.

"That will be fine," he said. "I like Californians." Then: "By the way, Molly, that reminds me, there's some one I want to have meet you when we can manage it. You see, while you were ——"

"Oh! Then that's it?" she said.

He felt disconcerted.

"That's what?" he asked, trying to look guileless.

"That's what you have to tell me."

"Yes," he returned; "I was just starting to tell you."

"I knew it," she averred, "the minute you said 'by the way.'"

Already he was thoroughly uncomfortable. He

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hoped his face did not reveal the fact. He wished that Molly would not look at him that way — so steadily, and with that air of seeing through him and finding what she saw amusing. He thought it safer to ignore her last remark.

“ Well, as I was about to say, while you were away I naturally made it my business to keep in close touch with the children. I breakfasted with them every morning — never missed a morning — and at night I either had dinner with them or else came home and saw them before going out. Of course, I did go out some. For instance, there was the bazaar. You left the tickets for me, you remember? Well, that was ——”

“ Did you take her to the bazaar? ”

“ Take her? Who? ”

“ The person of whom you have been telling me.”

“ But I have n’t told you.”

“ Oh, yes.” She smiled frankly now.

He felt the color mounting to his temples.

“ No, I have n’t.”

He wished to demand, “ When did I begin telling you? ” but was deterred by a hideous feeling that she might refer to the recital. It was uncanny the way Molly got at things!

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"Never mind, then," she said, still smiling.
"Go on, Shelley. Is she any one I know?"

"No," he replied, surrendering.

"Some one you met at the bazaar?"

"Yes — I met her at the bazaar. Why?"

Molly laughed outright.

"Are you very miserable, dear?"

For the first time he was frank.

"Rather," he admitted, smiling ruefully.

At that her manner changed.

"Come," she said in the gentle tone he had so often heard her use with the children, and which more than once before she had used with him,
"Come, tell mother everything. It will make you feel better."

It did make him feel better to tell, though he did not tell her everything — not quite.

"She sounds young," commented Molly after having listened to the story.

"She is, rather," he said. "Twenty-four. But she'll be twenty-five on the eleventh of next month."

"Hm-m," said Molly. "What's she like?"

"I've told you," he answered eagerly. "She's really an awfully nice girl, Molly. So sincere and free from ——"

A RECITAL

"Yes, yes," she said, "you have told me all that. I mean, what does she look like? Is she big or little, blonde or brunette?"

"She's a blonde," he answered. "Her hair is about the color of yours. She's a little taller than you are, but more slender — weighs a hundred and twenty-eight, to be exact."

Molly burst out laughing.

"What's the matter?" he asked miserably. "You asked me about her, and when I ——"

"Oh, Shelley, Shelley!" she said, shaking her head.

"And when I tell you," he went on, "then you laugh about it."

"You *did* tell me, too!" she said, still amused. "My poor Shelley! You've tried to be so discreet; you've tried to break it to me so very, very carefully; and then at the very end you —— Oh, my poor, dear susceptible boy!"

"At the very end, *what?*" he demanded, suffering acutely.

"You tell me her **exact** age, date of birth and weight!"

"But you asked."

"And you knew! I did n't expect such minute

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particulars, Shelley. I don't issue automobile drivers' licenses, you know, and I'm not in the life-insurance business. Don't you see that it's funny that you knew?"

"No, I don't!" said he. "I just happened to know. One night when we were going somewhere in the subway she weighed herself on one of those slot machines they have in the stations. That's how I happen to know her weight. And as to her age and the date of her birthday — well, there was an astrologer at the bazaar. We went to him, just for fun, to have our fortunes told. We both gave our ages and our birthdays."

"They do at twenty-four," said Molly with a little sigh. She thought to herself: "I suppose it's natural that a young girl should attract him." But what she said was: "I suppose I'm getting middle-aged."

"Molly," he protested, "you are n't! Why, I was thinking only yesterday when you got off the train that you looked about twenty-five yourself."

She shook her head.

"But it's true! You always were lacking in self-appreciation, Molly. You're one of those people who will always be young. You're a better-

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looking woman right now than you were ten years ago. It's a fact; and you ought to be getting the joy out of it."

Though his sincerity and admiration were unmistakable she only shook her head again.

"Molly," he exclaimed, touching her hand under the table, "if I keep on falling in love with you more and more every year in the future, as I have in the past, why, by the time I'm about fifty I'll be so disgustingly sentimental over you that — that I'll mortify you in public — I'll be unable to conceal my maudlin infatuation — I'll sing love songs to you in Fifth Avenue buses — I'll make a spectacle of us both — you'll have to chloroform me!"

And Molly knew that though he spoke whimsically, the essence of truth was in his words.

CHAPTER XXI

MOLLY CALLS ON MAIDA

MAIDA'S studio-apartment occupied half of the top floor of an old red-brick residence in West Ninth Street, which had been made over into an apartment house. Never until the day in the week following, when he escorted his wife thither for tea, had the four flights of stairs much disturbed the regularity of Shelley Wickett's breathing.

"Yes," panted Molly, reaching the top, "she's young, beyond a doubt." Then as he reached to ring the bell she interrupted the gesture, saying: "Wait. I want to get my breath first."

Nervous as he was, Wickett had time to be proud of Molly's bearing as she and Maida met. You could rely on Molly. She was a thoroughbred. From the outset the situation was in her hands. She had the power, the finesse, to make things either difficult or easy, and, Molly-like, she chose the latter course.

MOLLY CALLS ON MAIDA

"I'm under obligations to you, Miss Greenwood," she said sweetly. "You've been very kind to this lonely boy of mine." A fine delicacy made her avoid alike the formality of "Mr. Wickett" and the assertive possessiveness of "my husband."

"Shelley has been very kind to me," said Maida.

He wished dimly that she had waited just a moment before using his Christian name. Yet it was like forthright Maida not to wait. There was something admirable yet unskillful in her complete directness.

"Not at all," he said, feeling the necessity of speaking. "It's as — as Mrs. Wickett says, you've been awfully nice to me."

That subject seeming to be exhausted — unless the set of de Maupassant, the electric toaster, the bedside table and the cocktail shaker were to be adduced as evidence on Maida's side — there came a moment's pause, which Molly broke before it grew to awkward length, with an exclamation of pleasure over several of Maida's painted parchment lamp shades which she discovered lying on the pile of books, papers and other objects that all but concealed the surface of the large table.

Wickett's uneasiness increased as Maida exhibited

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these examples of her craftsmanship to his wife. Having warned Maida that the shade he had purchased on the night of their first meeting was to be one of his Christmas presents to Molly, he did not fear that she would speak of that. The thing that concerned him was that one of the newly painted shades was decorated with the signs of the zodiac, and he feared that this might turn the conversation to astrology.

The fear was justified.

"You are interested in horoscopes?" suggested Molly, after paying a tribute to the beauty of the shade.

"Yes, indeed!" Maida replied. Then she added: "I think even Shelley may be inclined to admit that there is something in astrology."

Wickett tried to say something noncommittal.

"What's your month, Mrs. Wickett?" Maida asked.

"March."

"Ah," said Maida, and glanced at Shelley.

"Yours, I think, is December," Molly said. Then turning to Shelley: "Isn't that what you told me?"

He nodded.

MOLLY CALLS ON MAIDA

"Yes," replied Maida. "And Shelley's is April. I personally think that's one reason why we became such good friends. Don't you, Shelley?"

"It might have had something to do with it," said he. "I'm sure I don't know."

"You mean," said Molly, "that April and December people are supposed to be congenial?"

"Yes. They vibrate on the same plane."

"Oh," said Molly, "I didn't know that. I've never looked into astrology."

"I think you'd find it well worth while," Maida said.

"Perhaps," Molly answered sweetly; "but you see for years I've been busy with domestic affairs and with my family. I have very little time for outside things. Even music, which was my great interest before I married, has gone by the board. With you it is different. You are young and independent. You can experiment with things."

Though she spoke blandly, Wickett knew Molly's gentle style of irony well enough to surmise that her remark about experimenting might be double-edged. He was glad that Maida seemed oblivious to such a possibility.

Even when the talk drifted into channels quite

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impersonal, Wickett continued to feel ill at ease. Molly and Maida seemed to be getting along well enough. Both were, indeed, apparently making every effort to be agreeable. Yet might not that, perhaps, be the very thing that was wrong? Effort. There was too much effort. The room was full of it. And of the burden of it, he felt upon his own shoulders the weight of his full share.

Physically the studio was unchanged. It was the same picturesquely disordered room in which he had lately known delicious, tingling contentment. But now for him there was something gone out of the place — something essential. What was it? Might it be that in his acutely nervous state he was surveying the studio, as it were, through Molly's eyes? Perhaps. At all events the dust, the disorder, the general untidiness, the cobwebs overhead — for to kill a spider is unlucky — struck him, for the first time, as not altogether prepossessing.

What was Molly thinking of it all?

When Maida invited Molly in to see her bedroom he too glanced in, and was shocked to see that it looked as though a whirlwind had blown through it. Articles of clothing were tossed helter-

MOLLY CALLS ON MAIDA

skelter over bed and chairs, bureau drawers were open, and on the glass top of the dressing table toilet articles swam in a sea of talcum powder. He was glad that Molly's dressing table did not look like that. Maida might have taken the trouble to clear up a little when his wife was coming!

Nor was he pleased to observe, when she served tea, that the cups and saucers were dusty. And still less was he pleased when, after pouring tea, she said in a matter-of-fact way:

“Oh, Shelley, I've forgotten the cream. Would you mind getting it?”

The remark obviously implied so much. As he went to get the cream he found himself wishing profoundly that Maida had been just a little tactful. She might so easily have added: “You'll find it in the ice box in the pantry — the second door to the left, down the hall.” It was one thing to be open and aboveboard, and another to — to — Well, anyway, a woman, however young, however straightforward, ought to have intuitively some little notion how to play the game.

Oh, the relief he felt when, after what seemed to him an interminable stay, Molly rose to go! Oh, the relief it was to take up his overcoat and hat;

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to find himself moving downstairs, out upon the dusky street, into the automobile beside his wife! In the automobile, however, the feeling of relief abated.

What did Molly think of Maida? What would she say?

He waited. But Molly spoke of other things.

"Well," he ventured when he could bear the suspense no longer, "did you have a pleasant time?"

"Yes," said Molly. Then she asked: "Did you?"

"Of course," he replied, feeling vaguely irritated at the question.

There was a pause.

"Don't you think her nice?" he said at length.

"Certainly. Very nice."

"Molly," he said impatiently, "what I'm trying to get at is: What do you think of her?"

"Oh, that's what you want to know? Well, I think she's young and pretty and talented and tempermental and sentimental and ——"

"Sentimental? Nonsense!"

"No, it's not nonsense. But I can tell better about that after she has been to the house for dinner once or twice."

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"Oh, well," he returned in a large, leisurely tone, "there's no need to be in any special rush to have her at the house for dinner. I just wanted you to be polite — to show some interest in her, you know — after her having been so — so decent to me. But your having gone down there to-day fixes that for the present."

Molly appeared to have become suddenly interested in the glittering maelstrom of the brilliantly lighted avenue. He could not see her face.

"I don't feel so," she said. "I want to be particularly nice to her."

"Why?" From his tone one might almost have supposed that he did not wish her to be particularly nice to Maida.

"For the reason you just mentioned," she replied over her shoulder.

"What reason?"

"Because she was so nice to you."

"But," he answered quickly, a note of protest in his voice, "if it comes to that, I've been nice to her too. I don't feel that there's any real obligation either way."

"From what I understand," his wife answered, "I can't agree with you. You say you have dined

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there frequently, letting her get dinner for you, and that you have taken her out to dinner once or twice. It seems to me she has done a great deal, and that you have done very little."

Wickett hesitated for a moment before replying.

"I forgot to mention," he said, "that I had given her some little presents."

"Oh," she said.

"Yes — an electric toaster, and a few books, and such things."

"Oh."

Their limousine had merged itself with the triple row of motors arrested on the east side of the Avenue before the Public Library, awaiting the permissive whistle of the traffic policeman at the Forty-second Street crossing. Molly's face was still turned toward the window.

"So," he continued, "you see accounts are quite square."

"Yours and hers may be," she answered. "No doubt they are. I'm thinking of my own obligation."

"Yours?" he said in a perplexed tone as the traffic policeman's whistle sounded and the motors started to move on.

MOLLY CALLS ON MAIDA

"Yes. The obligation of a wife who has been away, to a nice girl who — who has kept her husband from — from getting too lonely during her absence."

He shot a quick suspicious glance in her direction, but was still unable to see her face.

"It's good of you to feel that way about it," he said, without enthusiasm, "but I don't think there's the least need of it — not the very least."

Molly did not reply.

As the limousine sped across the Forty-second Street intersection a middle-aged man who was standing on the corner, trying to make up his mind whether to walk home or take a Fifth Avenue bus, chanced to glance up and see Molly's face in the window.

He looked after the car as it flew up the Avenue. Then turning up the ends of his mustache and throwing back his shoulders he stepped out jauntily toward home, where his little wife and five children awaited him.

"I'll walk," he thought. "It will make me late for dinner, but I'll walk. I must walk more. It keeps one young."

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He took a brisk gait, swinging his arms more than usual.

“I’m not in the has-been class yet,” he reflected complacently. “That was a mighty pretty woman in that limousine, and she was certainly smiling straight at me.”

CHAPTER XXII

MAIDA DECIDES

SITTING in her studio at dusk some three weeks later, looking out over the snow-covered roofs of the houses across the street, toward the twinkling windows of some loft buildings which circumscribed the view to the northward, Maida pondered the situation.

Shelley Wickett was terribly repressed. His fine sensitive April spirit was being crushed within him. He was starving for the want of understanding.

Her mind reverted to the evening on which he had told her that his wife was coming home. Looking back, she perceived that the change in him had begun to manifest itself while he was making that communication. It was as though the shadow of his wife had fallen darkly on his spirits before her actual arrival. Thenceforward matters had grown worse. She thought of the afternoon on which she had first met Mrs. Wickett — that after-

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noon when he had brought her down to the studio to tea. On that occasion he was not himself at all.

She had at first attributed his new constraint to concern over what she would think of his wife, but that idea she had been forced by subsequent events to discard, at least in part. The first time she dined at their house she saw that the root of the trouble lay deeper than that. All that evening he had been painfully distraught, showing now and then a gayety obviously false, now lapsing into brooding silence. Though she had been placed by him at table, he had spoken to her very little, and when he did so his manner was self-conscious and embarrassed; but though most of his attention seemed to be given to the lady at the other side, Maida, with the psychic perception of one born in December, knew that he was keeping one ear cocked in her direction, listening to everything she said. Poor boy! Denied the happiness of close communion with her, he had to take vicarious comfort from what he heard her say to others.

Twice, at her solicitation, he had dropped in at the studio on his way home from business, but though she had tried to call back the old atmosphere of sympathetic comprehension, it would not return.

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He had all too clearly been restless, preoccupied, unhappy.

The source of his suffering was, in Maida's eyes, quite evident. His wife did not understand him. Naturally not! She was born in March. She did not vibrate on the same plane as her husband. She was just a pretty, domestic, maternal creature, who knew how to wear expensive evening gowns, get her hair up effectively and give conventional course dinners. She was full of affability and social graces, but she had, Maida was persuaded, the soul of a canary. In the atmosphere she made about him, Shelley's beautiful nature was withering.

What was to be done? Was she, Maida — the only person, perhaps, in the whole world who knew the real Shelley — to sit idly by while such a thing went on? Was that the course of a true friend? Was it the course of a free spirit in tune with the infinite? "No!" cried every instinct she possessed.

Instinct!

What had the fortune teller said? Had he not told her to follow her instincts; that they would invariably be right — especially in cases where she vibrated on the same plane with some one?

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She moved over to the large table, turned on the lamp — the shade of which was the one decorated with the signs of the zodiac — and read the chapter headed December :

Persons born during this month, though impulsive, are honest and conscientious to a fault. They have their own way of doing things, and this often confuses their friends and causes children of December to be unsuccessful in handling the affairs of others. They are extreme in their likes and dislikes, are likely to love whole-heartedly, but resent any interference with their individuality, and usually despise whatever they cannot or will not understand.

She read on. Ah! Here was the passage for which she was looking:

They are thoughtful, artistic, sympathetic, and so quick of perception as to be almost psychic. They are endowed with temperament and personality to a marked degree, and should invariably follow their inspirations, however extreme these may seem, as they are almost certain to be right. They have an instinctive love of openness, truth and plain dealing, and should give this instinct free rein.

She placed a scrap of paper in the book to mark the place, closed it and sat for a time in deep

MAIDA DECIDES

thought. She knew well what instinct dictated. But this was Christmas Eve, the busiest night in the whole year. The Wicketts might be having company, and even were they not, Shelley was almost certain to be at home. Moreover, she herself had promised to attend a party down in Greenwich Village. Would it not be best, considering all these factors, to wait until the Christmas rush was over?

Reason said "Yes," but instinct — the unerring instinct of the December-born — shouted "No!"

Maida rose, went to her bedroom, called up Mrs. Wickett and asked to see her that evening.

"Why — yes," said Molly. "After dinner Shelley and I are going to trim the children's tree. Could you come then?"

"I should like to see you alone, if possible," Maida said.

"Oh, I see," said Molly, who, herself surrounded by Christmas packages and with her heart full of the season's spirit, fancied she scented something in the nature of a Christmas surprise for her husband. "I'll get him out of the house somehow. I'll send him with presents to some friends. Will you come about half past eight?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

THE Christmas tree, as yet untrimmed, was standing in the corner of the Wicketts' living-room; on the tables and the floor about it were innumerable packages gayly wrapped and tagged, and boxes in which lay varicolored glass balls, large and small, tinsel, artificial snow and icicles, and strings of minute electric lights ready to be distributed among the dark green branches.

As Maida entered, Molly was engaged in untangling several strings of shiny glass balls, which had become entwined.

"Oh, good evening, Miss Greenwood," she exclaimed. "It's so nice in you to have thought of coming up. I got Shelley out as I agreed to."

"I'm glad of that," Maida said, hesitating in the middle of the room.

Still full of her idea that the call was a season-

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able one, and perceiving that Maida carried a book, Molly held out her hand to take it, saying: "For Shelley? I'll see that it is put with his other presents, where he won't find it until morning."

Maida made no move.

"It's not that, Mrs. Wickett," she said. "I came to talk with you."

"How stupid of me!" Molly exclaimed. "Well we can talk while I'm getting these trimmings sorted out. I try to put them away carefully every year, but some of them always seem to get broken, and invariably there's a tangle. Did you ever see anything like it?"

Maida stood silent. What a completely materialistic woman Mrs. Wickett was! Truly, an earth-bound spirit. How typical of her that she could be consumed with interest in these gewgaws and oblivious to the fact that she was smothering the noble and delicate nature of her husband. Her trivial line of thought, her inconsequential chatter, made it hard to begin. Why, when she had said so significantly, "I came to talk with you," had not Mrs. Wickett the common sense to make the obvious inquiry: "What about?" Yet she had gone on prattling about tree trimmings.

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Maida felt that she must try again.

"I came to talk about a very serious matter," she said in a grave tone.

Molly glanced up at her with a quick motion of the head like that of a bird; then as quickly she looked down again at the tangled strings of glass balls in her lap.

"A very serious matter?" she repeated, in the tone she might have used if instead she had said "A chocolate cake?" "A very serious matter on Christmas Eve? Oh, no, Miss Greenwood!"

She had the air of genially brushing the idea aside as something impossibly bizarre.

"But I am in earnest!" insisted Maida, still standing in the center of the room. "I have come to ——"

"But you're *not* in earnest!" Molly insisted with what seemed amiable incredulity. "Who ever heard of such a thing as a solemn talk on Christmas Eve? Such things don't happen. Now you pull up that chair and help me with this tangle, and then we'll get all the other trimmings ready and — oh, before you sit down would you mind ringing? — the button's over there by the door — and we'll have the stepladder brought in."

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Maida hesitated for a moment. Then she crossed and rang.

"Mrs. Wickett," she insisted as she moved back, "the fact that it is Christmas Eve should only emphasize the importance, the very grave importance, of what I came to talk about. If it were something having to do with me alone, I should not have thought of ——"

As the maid appeared at the door she stopped speaking.

"Oh, Hilda, would you please bring in the small stepladder?"

"Yes'm." The girl turned to go.

"And Hilda! Have we an old sheet — a very large one?"

"Yes'm."

"Bring that, too."

"Yes'm."

As Hilda withdrew Molly explained to Maida:

"Perhaps you wonder what I want with a sheet? I'm going to put it all round the bottom of the tree, on the floor. Can you guess why?" She gave added force to the interrogation by looking expectantly at the other woman.

Maida, though she did not wish to become in-

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volved in a discussion of Christmas tree appurtenances, though every fibre in her being rebelled at such a thing, had no choice but to answer.

"I'm sure I have n't the very least idea," she replied with every evidence of indifference, if not scorn.

"Then," asserted Molly brightly, "I can tell you one thing: You've never used any of this artificial snow." She held out a box of the white glistening stuff for Maida's inspection. "It looks pretty but it's awfully sticky. We had a frightful time getting it out of the rugs last year. I was n't going to have it again, but Shelley likes it, so we're going to. Hence the sheet. Now come and sit down — do."

With evident reluctance Maida moved forward and slowly let herself descend into the proffered chair. After a moment's pause she opened her lips as though to speak.

"And now," said Molly quickly, "to return to the thing you were mentioning — serious talks on Christmas Eve. As I was about to say, I don't believe in such things, and I don't believe you do either — not when you stop to think about it. Do you?"

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“Not ordinarily, perhaps,” the girl returned; “but under the circumstances ——”

“No, not under any circumstances,” Molly ran on. “Christmas Eve or no Christmas Eve, a serious talk is not something to commence on impulse. All of us have impulses, now and then, to go to some one and declare ourselves, and turn things topsy-turvy. When we yield to such an impulse we always begin by saying we have come for a serious talk. Sometimes, too, the person to whom we have gone can guess quite accurately, from observations of his own, just about what we intend to say. And sometimes he will attempt to prevent our saying what we have in mind, because he knows that if we succeed in saying it, we may bitterly regret it, later. Remember, I am a good deal older than you are. I assure you impulses are often very dangerous things.”

“For some they may be,” Maida answered, “but for others they are the best possible guide. People born in my month regret it, not if they follow their impulses, but if they fail to follow them.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I’ve noticed it,” the girl returned eagerly; “and — look at this!” She opened the book at the place

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marked by the scrap of paper and offered it to Molly, indicating the page.

"M-m, m-m, m-m"—Molly made a little inarticulate humming sound as her eye ran down the page. Then suddenly aloud she read:

"They have their own way of doing things, and this often . . . causes children of December to be unsuccessful in handling the affairs of others."

"No, no," said Maida impatiently, pointing to the succeeding paragraph.

Again Molly read aloud:

"They are endowed with temperament and personality to a marked degree, and should invariably follow their inspirations, however extreme these may seem, as they are almost certain to be right."

"You see?" Maida gazed at her intently.

"But," said Molly, "does n't it seem to you that those two statements contradict each other? I see it says they should follow their inspirations, but is n't that discounted by the statement that they are unsuccessful in handling the affairs of others? I should say it implied very clearly that they should follow their inspirations only where their inspirations applied strictly to themselves. Does n't it strike you so?"

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“That’s a mere detail,” Maida answered. “The interpretation of it depends on one’s point of view. For my part I believe there can be such a thing as — as a sacred duty. I mean, where you understand somebody and ——”

At this juncture Hilda, who had already brought the sheet reappeared carrying the stepladder, which she set up near the tree. When she departed again Maida resumed:

“—— where you understand somebody and you see that ——”

There, however, she was once more interrupted, this time by an exclamation from Molly. Two of the entangled strings had broken, letting a score of the glass balls roll down upon the rug.

“Oh, good gracious!” cried Molly, getting down to gather them up, while Maida, though she did not feel disposed to do so, picked up those that had rolled to her feet.

“Now let’s see,” reflected Molly aloud when the frail, bright-colored globes were re-collected. “I must get some thin string to thread them again. It seems to me there was a ball of thin string somewhere in Shelley’s desk.”

She crossed the room and fumbled in one drawer

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after another until she reached the bottom one, which she had some difficulty in opening, so packed it was with those odds and ends often contained in the bottom drawers of desks.

While Molly, in her search, removed some of the uppermost things from the drawer Maida watched her abstractedly. She felt helpless, uneasy, baffled. The strong determination to speak her mind, which had at first possessed her, was somehow failing. Matters had not gone at all as she expected. Visioning in advance the scene between herself and Mrs. Wickett she had descried herself the dominant figure, with Molly gazing at her, wide-eyed, silent, perhaps tearful, as the error of her ways was pointed out. But it had not been like that. She had not dominated. To try to dominate a woman as scatter-brained as Mrs. Wickett was like trying to pick up quicksilver between the thumb and forefinger.

"The string does n't seem to be here," said Molly, now seated on the floor with some unframed photographs in her lap, "but I've come across something that reminds me of one of those ill-advised serious talks of which we have been speaking." She smiled reminiscently, looking at the uppermost photograph,

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then added: "I had forgotten that we ever had a picture of the woman. I'm surprised that Shelley kept it."

Maida, who had not been interested, became so on hearing the last sentence.

Molly rose and laid the photographs upon the table. The top one was that of a handsome, dark, slender woman in evening dress. It showed signs of having been removed from a frame, and Maida saw that it was inscribed to Shelley, the inscription being

Toujours à toi, LÉNA.

written in a bold, dashing hand.

"She's a good-looking woman, isn't she?" Molly said. "And you'd think from her picture that she had sense."

"Yes," Maida agreed.

"She'd have struck you that way, at first, if you had met her, too," Molly went on. "She was thoroughly presentable and seemed intelligent. Men took to her — and she to them. But, my dear, you'll never believe what she did! I can hardly believe it myself, now."

Evidently what the lady had done had some

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bearing upon Shelley. Maida's curiosity was rising.

"What did she do?" she asked.

"Well, in the first place, though you may not know him well enough to have noticed it," Molly replied, "I can tell you that Shelley is very attractive to women. I don't suppose it's his fault, poor dear, but every now and then some woman gets quite agitated about him and gives him a bad half hour; and sometimes they make me a little trouble. But this one was the worst — far the worst."

Maida was now gazing at her with large, astonished eyes.

"You know how some women are, when they get silly about a man," Molly continued. "They get to thinking they're the only ones who understand him. But it's one thing to think that, and quite another to go to the man's wife and try to explain such a sweet little notion to her. Yet — would you believe it? — that's what this woman did. She actually came and undertook to tell me she understood my husband better than I did. According to her I did n't understand him at all. It was in the days when they talked so much about affinities. I remember she used that word a great deal. And

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what do you suppose she wound up with? With the calm suggestion that I give him up to her. Yes. Absolutely!"

"What happened?" asked Maida in a small voice.

"Nothing much. I gave her some smelling salts and suggested that she'd be better off in her own home. Of course I had to tell Shelley about it. We were both terribly ashamed for her, and naturally he was furious. Well, that's an example of what a woman can do on impulse. No doubt if she had considered a little she'd have known better. But she thought herself temperamental, and she lost her self-control, poor thing!"

She gathered up the photographs, put them back in the drawer and closed it.

Maida was silent, staring into space.

"Now," said Molly, "do you know what I think would be nice? Let's start trimming the tree. Suppose we surprise Shelley by having a lot of it done?"

So saying she took up the sheet, unfolded it, and dropping to her knees began to spread it about the bottom of the tree.

"You be getting out the strings of tinsel and the

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glass icicles and things from the boxes on the table, will you?" she directed, without looking up.

"Yes," answered the other faintly.

When, having arranged the sheet, Molly rose to her feet she was careful not to look at Maida for a while.

But the traces of tears were not altogether obliterated from the girl's eyes when presently Shelley returned.

CHAPTER XXIV

SOUVENIRS

AS he caught sight of Maida, something peculiar happened to Wickett's breathing apparatus. What could she be doing here alone with Molly? What could have brought her? Had Molly known that she was coming?

For a moment he had the reassuring thought that at least everything seemed to be going pleasantly. Molly was on the stepladder hanging things upon the half-trimmed tree, while Maida stood below handing them up to her.

"I have a good place here for another of those big silver balls," he heard his wife saying.

"Here's the last one," answered Maida, placing it in Molly's outstretched hand.

"Why — good evening!" he said, advancing into the room.

"You came back too soon," protested Molly. "We were trying to get it all trimmed, to surprise you."

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Maida did not look at him.

No, things were n't right at all. Molly was too busy, too vivacious; and Maida, he now saw, carried in her face the signs of recent weeping. Something had been going on. Had there been a scene? He thought of the affair of Lena Brundage, and shuddered. Could it be possible that Maida, too, had come up and tried to start something? He signaled Molly to follow him out of the room, but seemingly she did not see the signal, for though he went, she continued to decorate the tree; wherefore, after waiting for a time, he was obliged to return.

"Come and help us, you lazy thing," said Molly.

He came and helped awkwardly, trying to conceal, in a pother of small talk, his annoyance and apprehension.

Tears! How he hated tears! Why did women always cry if you gave them half a chance? How boresome they could be!

The trimming of the tree consumed endless time. Meanwhile Molly kept up her steady stream of chatter. He, too, tried to do his share, but Maida spoke little and kept her face averted. She might have tried to help along a little!

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"There!" sighed Molly when all the trimmings were in place. "How does it look?"

"Fine!" he said, hardly glancing at the tree, but eager that the evening's occupation should be ended.

"What do you think, Maida?" Molly asked. "You don't mind my calling you that, do you?"

"It's very pretty. No, I'll be pleased. I think I'll say good night now. I was going to a party downtown, and ——"

Molly looked significantly at Shelley. Then as he did not speak she said: "Shelley will be delighted to drive you down, I know."

"Of course," he said. "Delighted."

When he had telephoned for a taxicab he waited eagerly, hoping that while Maida was putting on her cloak Molly would find a moment's time in which to give him some inkling of the situation; but no such comfort was accorded him.

A few moments later the taxi was announced and he found himself leaving the house very reluctantly with a young lady whom he now regarded as a dangerous little bunch of temperament, and whose present thoughts and emotions he was very curious, and at the same time very much afraid, to know. Nor did he doubt that he was about to learn them —

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and that the experience would be a disagreeable one.

As they crossed the walk toward the cab there came to him vividly, grotesquely, the memory of another time when he had stepped with Maida toward a waiting taxi. He had been afraid to propose that first drive, but ah, how much more afraid to propose this one! He remembered the almost ecstatic feeling of delicate adventure, of aliveness, of recrudescence youth, that he had felt as they set forth that other time. That night the streets had shone with rain; to-night they shone with melted snow. It was the same, yet not the same at all.

It was a long drive down to Greenwich Village, and though the drive home was infinitely shorter, Molly had retired when he reached the house again. Her bedroom door was closed. Despite his great anxiety to hear what she might have to say, he thought it wiser not to run the risk of waking her, especially to-night, when they must rise so early for the morrow's celebration with the children.

So be it, then. The talk could wait. But there was one thing, one most important thing, that he must see to before he went to bed.

Going to his own room he opened a closet door,

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and standing in the seat of a chair, reached down from the topmost shelf a very large, light, carefully wrapped package. Carrying it to the living-room he placed it on the table and proceeded to untie the ribbons with which the paper covering was bound.

As the wrappings fell away, the contents of the package was revealed. It was a lamp shade—the lamp shade he had bought of Maida that first night at the bazaar.

Seated in a chair before the embers still faintly burning in the grate he held the shade up, and causing it to revolve slowly, inspected with care the series of six parchment panels, with their pictures.

Now, for the first time, he observed that there was sequence to these pictures—that the story of Harlequin and Columbine progressed round the shade. In the first picture Harlequin was peering at her through a half-open door; in the second, kissing her hand; in the third, dancing with her, madly; in the fourth, kneeling before her, hand on heart; in the fifth, embracing her; but in the sixth panel the two were seated back to back, as far apart as might be, their heads bowed in grief.

A tag, which he had prepared some time since, was attached to one of the wires of the frame. On

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it he had written, after some thought as to an appropriate inscription, the words:

For Molly, with love and Christmas greetings, from Shelley.

Drawing out his pocketknife he removed the tag and threw it into the fire.

Then he slit, one after another, the threads that held the parchment panels to the frame. When they were all removed, he placed them on the embers, and after watching them burn, beat them to fragments with the poker.

Only the frame remained. Into this he stuffed the wrappings and the ribbons, and with them returned to his own room, where, mounting the chair again, he put them back on the top shelf of the closet, crowding them as far to the rear as possible.

Then he returned to the living-room, sat down at the desk, and drew a check to Molly. It was rather a large check. Having written it he tore it up and wrote another, for double the amount. This he placed in an envelope, upon the outside of which, after some thought as to an appropriate inscription, he wrote:

SOUVENIRS

For Molly, with love and Christmas greetings, from Shelley.

This done, he drew from his breast pocket a pig-skin wallet, and from it removed a photograph, at which he looked intently for a time. It was a picture of Maida in fancy dress — as Columbine.

He rose, sighing as he did so, crossed slowly to the fireplace, bent over, and held the little picture poised above the embers.

Then, instead of letting go of it, he drew it back and looked at it again. It was the picture of a very pretty girl. And though his recollections of her were not altogether pleasant at the moment, it might be rather pleasant, after all, to take her picture out and look at it again, some day — when he was seventy or eighty.

He turned away from the fire, walked over to the desk, and drew out the bottom drawer.

It stuck a little, so packed it was with those odds and ends often contained in the bottom drawers of desks. On top there seemed to be some old photographs. He did not pause to see what photographs they were, but slipped the little picture in between them, and shut the drawer again.

CHAPTER XXV

AFTER FORTY

WHEN Mrs. Davenport, superbly tailored and toqued, walked the crowded Avenue of an afternoon she wore the air of a lady alone in the desert ; or, to be more accurate, of one playing before a large audience the rôle of a lady alone in the desert. It was her defense against staring eyes. For the height and carriage of Mrs. Davenport were nothing less than noble, and the degree of her modishness was sufficient to render her conspicuous even in the modish throng on the most modish street of the most modish city in the world.

Men, strangers to her, chancing to see her pass, became instantly aware of these qualities ; yet their awareness, it seemed, was of the senses rather than the sight, for always their gaze sought her face and held there, seeming to ignore all else. Nor was it the mere technical perfection of her features that engrossed observers. A woman's face, admirably

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modeled but lacking expression, is like a room admirably designed and furnished, but lighted only by a stable lantern. Mrs. Davenport's face, however, sent forth an unusual radiance; not the radiance of youth, but of youth sustained; not of dawn, but of sparkling noon. She was a woman as nearly ageless as it is possible to be — which is another way of saying she was probably somewhat older than she looked.

Her vividness was that of great physical aliveness. Beyond this, however, a more subtle intimation addressed itself to observant and sophisticated persons — a hint not alone of present aliveness but, as the saying is, of having "lived." It was but the faintest suggestion, like that of a scent so evanescent as to make one wonder whether one has actually detected it or has been tricked by fancy. Yet its very faintness made it more intriguing. Wherefore, as a sensitive nose will take a second sniff to verify the first impression of a passing perfume, certain dapper old Fifth Avenue campaigners would manage, without removing their eyes from Mrs. Davenport's face as she went by, to seem to look at her twice — first with admiration; then searchingly, as though the initial glance had revealed something unexpected

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just below the surface, arousing sudden, eager curiosity or even a faint, fantastic, wistful, visionary kind of hopefulness.

The eyes of men touched her always with benevolence, but the eyes of women were hard. Thus though saleswomen in fashionable shops intensely admired her, their gaze, following her, expressed the mingled awe and hatred one sees in the faces of old captive lions when they watch their trainer entering the cage. Nor did women ever look at her face only. The eyes of all of them ran over her from head to foot, coldly, swiftly, suspiciously, like the hard hands of a detective searching a doubtful character for concealed weapons.

And weapons were unquestionably there. But it should be said, in justice, that of Mrs. Davenport's weapons the most deadly were not of her own deliberate acquirement, nor even deliberately used by her, but had, so to speak, been slipped into her pockets by the hand of Nature. And Nature is never so prodigal as when the fancy strikes her to arm a female in the way that Mrs. Davenport was armed.

Thus of some of her weapons she herself was actually unaware. One of these was a faculty,

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quite without the bounds of her own volition, for setting folk a-dreaming. Not men alone, but also women. The very sight of her would do it.

For instance: Striding along the street, her chin up, her tantalizing blue eyes skimming the tops of passing hats, she would sweep by a nice ambling gentleman of ripe years and his amiable and usually placid wife. Whereupon, seeing her, the two would embark upon a pair of curiously interwoven dreams.

The husband, a devoted mate long since past the age of adventure, having received not so much as a glance from Mrs. Davenport, would nevertheless suddenly find himself wafted away with her to the deck of a phantom yacht, large and sumptuous, plying tropical waters at sunset — just the two of them alone on a far-off rosy sea, with music sounding faintly and fragrance floating to them from an island shore, and ——

And the wife, knowing herself secure in the attachment of her husband, confident of his “goodness,” aware that the tall magnetic beauty had not seen him and would not want him if she had, not definitely conscious of the scandal taking place in his imagination, would nevertheless find herself plunged

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into a waking nightmare in which her husband was stolen from her by this woman, carried off bodily to heaven knew where or what — though, to be sure, she had a feeling of dim lights, Oriental draperies and the sickish smell of burning incense in the surroundings to which her dream consigned him — while she was left to finish out her life, deserted and alone, in a flat consisting of seven rooms and three baths, in West Ninety-sixth Street.

These vivid episodes would be enacted independently in their minds as swiftly as life is said to pass in review through that of a man drowning. And if the husband should emerge from his iridescent intrigue in time to remark to his spouse: "That was a stunning woman — the tall one that just passed," thus more or less confirming her terrible dream-suspicions, he might be startled at the vehement indignation of his wife's reply, the savageness of her attack upon the fair unknown — a woman who, he felt, was of noble character for all that, being human, she might yield to the call of a great love. He would think privately that his wife had been unjust to the splendid creature, and would forthwith wander off into unuttered masculine thoughts upon the inherent unfairness of woman to

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woman, the inherent suspicion and dislike of wives for the more fascinating members of their own sex; and he would say to himself: "I had thought Mary was past that sort of nonsense!" And it would never occur to him to marvel, instead, at the acuteness of wifely instinct; at the miracle by which in a flash Mary had detected him in his tropical liaison, detected him as surely as though she had followed the guilty pair in an airplane, hovered above the phantom yacht, and watched her husband with the hussy!

It must by no means be supposed that Mrs. Davenport was invariably alone, or that she invariably walked, or that she spent all her time upon Fifth Avenue. When she was accompanied, her companion was usually a male of the type possessing tan spats, a *boutonnière* and a Malacca cane. One never noticed more than that about him; to walk with Mrs. Davenport was to practice a form of self-concealment. Sometimes she drove in her very smartly turned out little town car. Also she led the social life one might have expected a woman possessing a car like hers to lead — lunching with people, playing bridge with people, having tea with people, dining with people, going to the theater and

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the opera with people, and faring forth with people to sup and dance, by way of finishing the day.

And nothing about her charmed men and annoyed women more than the way she sustained the life of the gay treadmill. She was as fresh and sparkling at two in the morning as at two in the afternoon. Nor, in the eyes of other women, was there any justice in it. She paid not the least attention to her diet; she would drink champagne, eat Welsh rabbit, finish with black coffee and cigarettes, and — as she herself said, and everything about her indicated — go home and sleep like a baby. Men were given to speaking in glowing terms of her constitution or her physique, but women were more direct. “She’s as strong as a horse!” they would comment bitterly.

Being such a woman, and going, as they say, “everywhere,” Mrs. Davenport was naturally known by sight to many persons unknown by sight to her. She was recognized by strangers somewhat as celebrated politicians or popular theatrical stars are recognized. But with this difference: That she was a familiar figure to quantities of persons who had no idea who she might be, and who knew her only by some such designation as “that wonderful

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creature" or "that stunning woman we saw the other night at the Ritz."

Shelley Wickett was one of those who, having no clew to her identity, was yet accustomed to feel a slight agreeable shock whenever he caught sight of her.

"Ah! There she is again — bless her heart!" he would inwardly exclaim.

Passing her as he walked up the Avenue at twilight on the day following that on which he had reached the distressing and supposedly subdued age of forty years, he was pleased to discover that his keen appreciation of this unknown lady had not lessened. She still gave him that pleasant little start. That, though he had observed of late with a sort of sad complacency that he was becoming a better husband — that his susceptibility to feminine attraction, and his enterprisingness in coöperating with it, were dropping away from him like withered leaves from an autumnal tree.

Essentially, he told himself, he was glad of this; for he aspired to be worthy — or as nearly as possible worthy — of such a wife as Molly. Time only served to deepen his profound sense of the won-

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ders of her. From the very depths of his being he adored her. She and she alone it was who occupied the sacred inner chamber of his heart. He had always more or less deplored the fact that his heart was one of those possessing innumerable anterooms — sentimental vestibules — and that these from time to time had harbored temporary guests.

They always entered pleasantly, these passing occupants, each new arrival paying, as it were, rent in advance, by giving him a thrill. And a thrill, he still to some extent believed, was coinage not to be despised. It is of that which follows the first payments in this coinage that the landlord of a heart grows weary as the years pass by. For it is always the same story: More rent falls due; the tenant of the sentimental vestibule can furnish no more thrills; wherefore it becomes the difficult and disagreeable task of the landlord to dispossess her — a miserable business, always.

It is because of these things that the proprietor of many a male heart, nearing middle life, retires from the business of accommodating transient guests and thereafter devotes himself exclusively to that of remodeling the somewhat battered structure into a fit abode for the one admirable, the one perma-

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nent, the one truly treasured tenant who has ever occupied it.

Yet even when this time arrives — or when the landlord of the heart believes it has arrived — he may gather a certain melancholy pleasure from the sight of a new and charming face at the door, reminding him of the old tempestuous days when business was brisk. For retrospection is the solace of retirement. And there is double satisfaction in a wistful glance over the shoulder at that redoubtable siren, The Past, when such a glance is immediately followed by the virtuous renunciatory thought: “But no! I am beyond that sort of thing. My life is now an open book.”

Not many hours after he had encountered her on Fifth Avenue it chanced that Wickett felt again, and more acutely, the pleasant shock of seeing — nay, visioning — the splendid lady. And this time she was frankly to be looked at; was indeed there for the sole purpose of being looked at; for she appeared as Diana in the fashionable *Tableaux de Printemps* given expensively, for charity, in the grand ballroom of an extravagant hotel.

When the curtains parted on Diana, goddesslike

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indeed, brave-posed in airy draperies with bow and arrow, Wickett seized eagerly upon the opera glasses hitherto vainly proffered by his wife, and gazed through them until, after a splendid minute, the curtains fell again. Then hastily returning the glasses to Molly's lap he took up his program, intending to identify Diana.

"Her name is Mrs. Davenport," elucidated his wife, on whom these manifestations were not lost.

"I've often seen her. Do you know who she is?"

"A friend of the Klingmans, I believe."

"M-m," he muttered vaguely. More than once he had spoken to his wife of a lack of discrimination shown by the Klingmans in selecting friends. Then he asked: "Is there a Mr. Davenport?"

"I've heard there is — a convenient Mr. Davenport who lives on the Riviera, writes checks, goes his way and lets her go hers."

"The more fool he," said Wickett.

"To have married a woman of that type, you mean?"

Her lack of perception astonished him.

"Certainly not!" he replied. "I mean ever to let such a wonderful creature out of his sight."

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During the dancing following the tableaux he shook hands genially with Charlie Klingman, who chanced to be crossing the floor with Mrs. Davenport — now in the somewhat more ample draperies of a modern pagan goddess. He was presented, and danced with her. For a woman so statuesque she was amazingly light of movement. He spoke frankly of her beauty — one may speak thus to a lady just out of a gold frame — and remarked that he had seen her on the Avenue that afternoon, and other afternoons.

“I like those little hats you wear,” he said. “Toques, don’t you call them?”

“Yes, toques,” she assented. Then with a bewitching little smile: “I’m glad you like them; for I’ve always liked your taste in scarfs.”

A direct hit! For an instant he wondered whether by any chance Diana could have loosed at random the shaft that struck his scarfs. But no! That was impossible. She could never have guessed that scarfs were a hobby with him — that he possessed a collection of a hundred or two, with a special rack to hold them. No, beyond a doubt she had noticed him! Those tantalizing eyes of hers saw more than they seemed to on the Avenue.

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"My scarfs," he returned, immensely stimulated, "would much like to turn and walk beside your toques. They've always wanted to."

"They must do it, then. You're fond of walking?"

"Very. I need n't ask about you."

"Yes, I like to walk. And it's lucky for me just now that I do."

"Lucky for the rest of us!"

She thanked him with her eyes.

"No — lucky for me. My car is being overhauled."

"The dark-blue brougham with the red wheels?"

"The same. So you remember it too?"

"Naturally. And to-night you ——"

"Yes, in a taxi — a rattly one."

"Not alone, surely?"

"Yes; for one reason or another my friends were ——"

"And when you go ——" he broke in eagerly.

"I expect to go as I came."

"Not if I can prevent it!" he declared. "My wife and I will consider it a privilege to be allowed to drive you home."

He escorted her across the floor and presented her

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to Molly, saying: "I know you 'll be happy to hear that we are to have the pleasure of driving Mrs. Davenport home, dear."

Molly was gracious. He could always count on her for that. And she continued to be gracious as, later, they drove from the hotel to Mrs. Davenport's house. But then, as she herself reflected, it was very easy to appear gracious on that drive; she had only to put in an occasional word by way of seeming to take part in the conversation. That was convenient, for she did not feel like talking. Chiefly she listened; and listening she envied Mrs. Davenport the vitality that enabled her not only to be vivacious at this hour of the morning but to rouse vivacity in another. Shelley, who would normally have been tired by now, was all on the alert; conversation flew back and forth between the pair with all the flash and crackle of wireless between two eager operators.

When having escorted Mrs. Davenport across the sidewalk and bowed his last good nights in the doorway, Shelley resumed his place in the limousine, he was bubbling with enthusiasm.

"What a charming woman!" he exclaimed.

"Of course she has n't any cares," said Molly.

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"And what a figure!"

"Yes," she returned dryly; "one was n't left in any doubt about that."

He protested: "Why, Molly! It was just like looking at a painting. The scenery, and the lights, and the gold frame, and the gauze over the front of it. And besides, it was for charity."

"Making a bow and arrow and half a yard of cheesecloth quite sufficient?"

"It was n't cheesecloth!" he denied indignantly.

"How do you know?"

"She told me it was silk chiffon."

"Told you?"

"Yes. I asked her."

"You *asked* her?"

"Yes. I asked because it was such pretty stuff — so light and shimmery and lovely in its blend of colors. I should think anybody 'd be interested to know what it was."

"Anybody might be interested to know exactly how much of it there was," she replied with unwonted irony.

"Well, for my part," he insisted, "I think, as I said before, that there was plenty. You could n't very well expect Diana to be bundled up like an

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Eskimo! There 'd be no sense in having a tableau of Diana at all if it had to be like that. Mrs. Davenport was picked for the part by a committee of prominent artists."

"Did she tell you that too?"

"It said so on the program," he answered with cold dignity. "Be fair, Molly. Do you deny that she made a wonderful Diana?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Diana was a huntress."

To that he did not reply. It was unlike Molly to say sarcastic things about another woman.

"Poor dear!" he thought to himself. "We've been going out too much. She's all worn out."

CHAPTER XXVI

INSTINCT

IT was Shelley Wickett's daily habit to leave his office between four and five o'clock, ride uptown in the elevated railway to Forty-second Street, stop in for half an hour at his favorite club, and then walk home by way of Fifth Avenue, to dinner. Dinner was at seven-thirty, but he usually reached home by seven; for quite aside from the fact that New York has lately become as dirty as a Middle-Western manufacturing city, he had theories on the subject of dressing for dinner, considering the practice beneficial to the domestic morale, much as regular morning shaving, even under battle conditions, is considered good for the morale of troops.

Now the disadvantage of a good habit of long standing is that it rouses expectations of invariable performance, and that consequently the slightest variation becomes conspicuous. So it was when, following the tableaux, Molly, habitually gentle, gen-

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erous and patient, allowed herself the luxury of sarcasm at the expense of Mrs. Davenport; and so it was now, a few days after, when contrary to established precedent, Shelley came home late for dinner.

Molly met him in the hall.

"I was beginning to worry about you, dear," she said. "It's quarter of eight."

He looked at his watch.

"Oh, no," he answered. "The clock's fast. It's only twenty minutes of eight; nineteen, to be exact. I won't dress to-night. You go in and start dinner. I'll join you in a moment."

Having hung his overcoat and hat in the hall closet he was moving toward his room.

"What delayed you?" she asked as he came to table.

"I was about to tell you. I ran into Mrs. Davenport this afternoon. We took a walk."

"You've been walking all this time?"

"No; I asked her to stop in for tea at the Plaza and ——"

"That's an odd coincidence. I had tea there to-day. Where did you sit?"

"I was just going to say — we didn't go there after all. She was expecting some people at her

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house, so I went home with her. She seemed to want me to meet them."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know. They didn't show up. She kept expecting them every minute and urging me to wait."

"I see," said Molly.

"By the way," he said quickly, "Mrs. Davenport was greatly taken with you."

"Indeed? I don't see —— Why, I only met her that evening after the tableaux. I didn't speak fifteen words while she was with us. What about me did she find to like?"

"Oh, she spoke of your poise, and all that. I remember she said: 'What a sweet little woman your wife seems to be. I do want to know her better.'"

"And I'm supposed to be flattered at that?"

"I don't see why not."

"Am I a 'little' woman?"

"No; not literally of course. 'Little,' as she used it, is a term of — of affection, almost."

"Not from woman to woman," Molly said. "It implies superiority — or even mild pity."

"Nonsense!"

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"Take away the word 'little' and see for yourself. Is a 'good woman' the same as a 'good little woman'? No. A 'good little woman' is a fool. A 'pretty woman' may have some dignity about her, but a 'pretty little woman' is a doll. And a 'sweet little woman' is a well-intentioned nobody — with an attractive husband."

"I don't see it at all!" he said irritably.

"Shelley," she said, "I fear you are becoming an obtuse little man."

This prelude made it the more difficult for him to broach, as though casually, the topic to which he had intended to lead up.

"She was certainly very much taken with you," he persevered. "Didn't she say she wanted to know you better? More than that, she's going to ask the Klingmans to invite us to a birthday party they're giving for her next week — dinner and the theater."

"I don't want to go."

"You don't? Why not?"

"Don't you think the Klingmans lack discrimination in the selection of their friends?"

"Molly," he replied with great solemnity, "I'm afraid we have been unjust to the Klingmans. To

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be sure, Charlie Klingman is a little bit on the rough diamond order, and Mabel Klingman becomes a trifle loud now and then. But Mrs. Davenport tells me that down underneath they 're really very fine."

"Possibly they are," she conceded.

"In judging others," he went on eagerly, "we ought to try to look below the surface — don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes."

"That's one thing I admire about you," he exclaimed, brightening visibly. "You always try to be fair." And after the briefest pause he added: "Then I assume it's all right about our going to the Klingmans' party?"

She gave him a surprised look.

"I can't see that that situation is changed in any way," she replied.

"Why," he answered, disconcerted, "didn't you just admit that we ought to be generous to people?"

"Yes; and it's always easier to be generous to people of that sort if you keep away from them."

"The fact is," he declared ruefully, "it's going to be frightfully awkward for me if you won't go. I told Mrs. Davenport we'd accept. I never dreamed

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you'd mind. And really I can't see yet why you do."

"Call it instinct if you like."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing instinct tells me I probably would n't like the play they'd select — it might even be the Winter Garden. Anyhow they don't want me — it's you they want. Why don't you just go, and let me stay home in peace?"

Here was a new idea; he found the very contemplation of it thrilling.

"Why, that's perfectly absurd!" he said. "Of course I won't go without you."

"Why not?"

"Oh, well — it's ridiculous." Then after a moment's rumination he added: "Still it is an awkward situation. As a matter of fact I have agreed to go, and if you don't want to go with me, I suppose the only way out of it is for me to go alone. Only I certainly won't do it on the basis of their not wanting you — because they do. On the other hand, though, as you really don't want to go it does seem rather senseless to — to drag you — does n't it? Yes — I could go alone."

He had already begun to congratulate himself

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upon this convenient adjustment when she spoke again.

"Of course," she said, "we must think how it will look to them if you go without me."

"Oh, that's all right!" he reassured her.

"I would n't want them to get the idea that we are like Mrs. Davenport and her husband."

He winced slightly, but thought best to pass over the allusion.

"On the whole," Molly went on, "I'd better go. I'll mind going, but I should mind not going still more."

"But why?" he protested. "Why go if you ——"

"Instinct," she put in.

Instinct! As though that explained anything at all! Never before, so far as he remembered, had she given such a silly, womanish reason. It sounded positively temperamental. And if there was one thing more than another for which he had always given her credit it was her freedom from that sort of foolishness.

"Molly," he said, shaking his head solemnly, "for mercy's sake don't begin being irrational at this stage of the game! It worries me to hear you

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talking about 'instinct.' Where on earth did you suddenly get all this instinct anyhow? It seems to be something entirely new."

"New?" she repeated, smiling. "Not at all. I got it long ago — when I was born a woman."

CHAPTER XXVII

A BIRTHDAY AND REBELLION

THE dinner given by the Klingmans in celebration of Mrs. Davenport's birthday — precise anniversary not specified — occurred in a fashionable restaurant. A table for eighteen was placed at the center of the large dining room, and the progress of the party from the foyer, where they gathered, to the flower-banked board, was as conspicuous as might be.

Molly found herself assigned for the evening to a tall, handsome, middle-aged man who looked as though he had been especially turned out for the occasion by a flock of tailors, haberdashers, barbers and manicures. He made her think somehow of an exceedingly lifelike dummy on whom a group of earnest window dressers had worked up to the last moment.

But unlike a dummy he could talk. Molly soon discovered that he liked to discuss food, drink and

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the theater. She asked his views on prohibition. That set him off, and thereafter he ran on, not only through dinner but through the musical comedy to which they subsequently went — arriving splendidly, just before the end of the first act. The show bore the title "Bad Baby!" The plot depended upon very persistent mistaken identity; there were many pretty girls, and a comedian who talked intimately to the audience about his salary and his troubles with his automobile and his wife.

As Molly had expected, Shelley was placed at Mrs. Davenport's side, not only at dinner and the theater, but also later when they all went to the Lunar Glades, the popular night resort of the season. Here, in a large, crowded, noisy ballroom, frantically decorated but agreeably lighted, they sat at the margin of the dancing floor, at small round tables jammed so close together that the spidery waiters, and the dancers going to and from their seats at the rear, could barely squeeze between, on the side away from the champagne buckets.

Most of the Klingmans' party danced, but Molly was relieved to learn that her escort preferred, as she did, to sit and watch the crowd. Having talked to her continuously, he regarded her as an unusually

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interesting conversationalist, and now even against the crashing syncopations of the jazz band he continued to talk, while she kept him happy by looking brightly at him every now and then as though she heard what he was saying.

Soon after they reached the Lunar Glades, Shelley came from his table and like a dutiful husband asked her to dance; she thanked him and declined. As the long evening wore on he came back every now and then to ask if she was tired, but she invariably reassured him. Having come she was resolved not to be a spoil-sport.

Frequently, amid the whirling heterogeneous pack upon the dancing floor, she caught sight of her husband. He danced often with Mrs. Davenport, and twice, as she glimpsed them, she noticed that the lady's head was thrown far back, that she might look directly into Shelley's face. Dancing or seated they talked vivaciously. Molly tried to construct an imaginary conversation for them — then quickly rejected the imagining. Why should she have fancied them as talking in that way? Was it perhaps because of the curiously confidential manner they had with each other; because of the expression of their eyes as they exchanged glances? Why was it that

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a stranger, seeing them, might think they knew each other a great deal better than they actually did? A stranger *would* think that! But why?

Her question was answered for her by a little episode she witnessed. While Mrs. Davenport happened to be speaking for a moment to Charlie Klingman, who sat at the other side of her from Shelley, Molly saw her husband draw a cigarette from his case — the case which had mysteriously appeared one Christmas during the progress of the affair with Mrs. Brundage — and look about for the matches. The match stand, as it happened, was on the next table, out of his reach but within easy reach of Mrs. Davenport. Instead of attracting her attention by speaking, Shelley touched her hand. She turned to him quickly, with that look of eager aliveness in her face. He showed the unlighted cigarette and indicated the matches with an inclination of the head.

To be sure, the jazz band was in action at the time, making dumb-show more practical than words as a means of communication; but even as on that ground Molly was extenuating the slight familiarity she had witnessed, the little scene between the two went on. Mrs. Davenport did not pass the stand to Shelley,

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but reached out a white arm, took a match, struck it, and offered him the light. He leaned to her, and she, inclining herself sidewise, allowed her shoulder to rest against his while the cigarette was being lighted. Over the flame of the match she saw them looking into each other's eyes.

At about two in the morning, when the last check had been paid and there was no more profit in keeping open, the management of the Lunar Glades began to indicate, by shutting down lights and opening windows to the chill of the outer night, a wish that patrons would depart. There was nothing for it but to go.

Alone in the limousine with her husband Molly relaxed with a sigh against the cushions. They rode for a time thinking their separate thoughts. Presently Shelley said reflectively: "Likes and dislikes are curious things, are n't they?"

"Yes."

"Don't you begin to see how attractive Mrs. Davenport is?"

"To men," she said.

He turned upon her sharply.

"I ought to tell you," he declared, "that in my

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opinion your attitude toward Mrs. Davenport has from the first been most peculiar! May I ask if you know anything to her discredit? Have you something definitely against her that I don't know about?"

"You don't seem to know about it."

"Can you give me any good reason for disliking her?"

"Yes. She's so obvious."

"Obvious?" he repeated, aghast. Of all conceivable terms this was the last he could imagine as applicable to Mrs. Davenport.

"Yes. As obvious as — as a big liner coming up the river all covered with flags, and the band playing, and the whistle blowing, and men rocking round like so many silly little boats in the swell."

"Really," he said after staring at her for a moment, "I'm astonished at you! You've never been like this before."

At that she sat up suddenly and turned to face him.

"No, I have n't!" she declared. "And I'm wondering if in not being like this before I have n't made a big mistake. All these years I've sat back and watched you get into one sentimental scrape

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after another, saying nothing, smiling, and being what your friend Mrs. Davenport calls a 'sweet little woman'—having women pitying me; or pitying you because you were married to a stupid nonentity who did n't 'understand' you. And often enough it has ended with my trying to pull you out of your scrapes when you'd got in too deep to pull yourself out. All these years I've done that because I thought I knew your temperament and believed that it was the best thing to do. I thought to myself: 'He's getting older; after a while he'll be surfeited with these sugary, sticky little affairs of his.' But now I'm wondering if instead of getting surfeited you've not been getting blunted. That's the danger of such things. Well, I've reached the end of my rope. This time I'm not going to wait until you're in a mess and then pull you out. I'm going to head you off right now! Why, the very fact that you can fall for a Mrs. Davenport—the very fact that you can ask why I don't like her—that you can upbraid me for not liking her—that shows what's been happening to you! But if you have to be told why I don't like her I can tell you, and I'll tell you now; I said she made a good Diana in the tableaux, and she did. She's a new sort of

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Diana. She hunts men, and feeds on their admiration. I don't pretend to say where she stops or does n't stop. That does n't matter. She's an obvious man-hunter. That is her one business in life. A wife has to have something to take pride in. And if she has to put up with a philandering husband, about all she has left is to take pride in the kind of women he philanders with. And when he takes even that away from her ——"

She left the sentence unfinished.

Wickett was stunned. Never in his wildest dreams could he have fancied Molly's talking in this way.

"Why, dear," he gasped, "I don't seem to know you at all to-night! You've always been so — so generous; so sensible, so ——"

"Is n't it time, then," she threw back, "that I should be able to expect as much of you? Can't you allow me for once the luxury of *not* being generous and sensible?"

He gazed at her, dumfounded, feeling like a man whose gentle little helpmate has of a sudden swung a blackjack on him. All his preconceptions of what was fitting between a husband and a wife, of what a husband's attitude should be, of the prestige to which

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a husband should cling as a monarchical absolutist clings to the dogma of divine right, had been knocked down over his eyes, as it were, like a battered crown. Enfeebled as he was by the shock, he felt dimly that he must protest. An emperor, even when being "abdicated" at the toe of a Bolshevik boot, must try to maintain some last vestige of his dignity.

He strove for a note of volition as he said wanly: "You ought to have told me something of this before, my dear. But of course since you feel that way about it — why, I'll — I'll avoid Mrs. Davenport in future."

"All right," said Molly.

He considered the remark entirely inadequate to the occasion, and would have liked to tell her so, but after an instant's thought decided that the better course was to be silent.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MESSAGE

THERE is no other city in the world in which a block, one way or another, makes such a difference as in the city of New York. Statistics tell us that the metropolis contains more than forty thousand men and women who belong to leading clubs, and it is safe to say that no one of these may walk the west side of Fifth Avenue in the crowded hours of the afternoon without meeting an acquaintance — or more likely a number of acquaintances. On the east side of the Avenue, where the current is not so strong, the likelihood of such encounters is materially reduced; on Madison Avenue, one block to the eastward, it is reduced still further, becoming an improbability; while on Sixth Avenue, a block to the west of Fifth, a person of the club-member class is concealed as in some uncharted city in the heart of China.

One could not expect Shelley Wickett to walk up

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Sixth Avenue. That would be too much to ask, for Sixth Avenue roars with its elevated railroad, its sidewalk crowds are shabby, it is flanked by untidy little shops and beset by smells from dismal bars and restaurants.

The sincerity of Wickett's resolution to avoid Mrs. Davenport was amply attested by the fact that for several days following his talk with Molly he walked uptown by way of Madison Avenue, and that, even when the relative somberness of that highway palled upon him, he did not resume his erstwhile course, but only ventured back as far as Fifth Avenue's eastern shore. Having decided upon renunciation he earnestly desired not to meet the lady. It seemed safer so.

Thus, between good fortune and good management, several weeks passed without his seeing her. Spring advanced — balmy, hazy spring, the season he loved best. But though one side of his nature still turned a little wistfully to vivid seasonable recollections, the would-be worthy husband in him was, upon the whole, contented as never before with the placid course of things.

The fact was that this year he found himself thinking a great deal about golf. All considered he

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was glad to be thinking about golf. It made him feel virtuous. Even a sardonic paraphrase which he discovered in the "funny column" of his paper one bright Saturday morning disconcerted him only momentarily:

"In the spring an old man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of golf."

Wickett resented the word "old." A man did n't have to be old to think about golf. Was n't *he* thinking of it? Yes; and the more he thought the more he felt that he must go out to the club and play that very afternoon. Moreover, since fall he had n't looked at his own summer home, which adjoined the links. Only the other day he had a letter from Joe, his caretaker, informing him of garden requirements, stating that a certain patch of English ivy had been winter-killed, and notifying him of the arrival of a litter of collie puppies. After golfing he could run over and inspect the place.

He reached his office full of the thought of telephoning immediately to arrange a match with Higgins, who, since Janie had her second baby, had lived out there the year round. But as he was

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hanging up his coat and hat there came a ring on his desk telephone.

It was Molly, asking him to go shopping with her that afternoon.

"What good will I be?" he asked.

"I've been looking at an evening gown," she told him. "It's very pretty, but I'm afraid it may be a little bit too young for me. I'd like you to see it."

"No dress is too young for you," he assured her. "If you like it, go ahead and get it."

"But I want you to like my clothes. I don't get so very many evening gowns, and you remember that rose-colored one you thought was ——"

"It was all right after they put the piece of tulle in," he said. "Those are things men don't know about, dear. I can't decide a thing like that. Your judgment in that line is lots better than mine. Besides, I've had a letter from Joe. He wants me to come out and look over the place. He needs a lot of things for the garden, and some of the ivy's dead, and — oh, well, there's no end of stuff I've got to see to out there. I was planning to go this afternoon. Of course if you really need me I'll give it up, but ——"

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"Oh, no," she answered. "You go along, dear. I'll manage all right."

"That's a darling girl!" he approved cordially.

Then he rang up Higgins and arranged for luncheon and a match.

Though he had trouble on the third, ninth and fifteenth holes, he won the match and came in with the comfortable feeling that for one who had not touched a club in several months he had acquitted himself well. A shower and fresh clothing served further to increase his sense of well-being, and he was in high spirits as he left the clubhouse and started to walk down the drive. There remained something more than an hour before train time. He proposed to cut across the links to his own domain, see Joe, tell him what to do, and get a hack to take him to the five-twelve.

The upper branches of the trees scattered over the links were swimming in the yellow-green of spring. Beyond one clump he presently sighted the roof of his house. It was good to see the place again. He wished they could move out earlier in the season, but the children's school prevented that. With every step the house came more into view.

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He began to think of improvements that he meant to make from time to time, and these thoughts so pre-occupied him that he hardly noticed a closed motor car which was standing in the drive at a point near where he intended to leave the road and cut across the turf.

As he walked by the machine he was vaguely aware that the chauffeur had the front floor boards out and was reaching down within.

Then suddenly he was startled by a voice coming from behind him, calling: "Shelley! Shelley Wickett!"

It was the voice of a woman, and even before he turned he knew who the woman was.

"Is that the way you rush by your old friends when you find them stalled on a country road?" demanded Mrs. Davenport playfully as she leaned from the window of the little dark-blue landaulet.

"You!" he exclaimed, turning back.

"Yes. Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"My house." He indicated it with a gesture.

"Have you moved out as early as this?"

"Oh, no. Not till June. I was just going to look things over. I'm returning to town on the five-twelve."

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"No indeed you're not!" she exclaimed.
"You're coming back to town with me."

"I have a lot of little things to see to," he said doubtfully.

"I'll wait for you."

"You're awfully kind. It's delightful to see you again."

The chauffeur began to replace the floor boards.

"All fixed, Wright?" asked Mrs. Davenport.

"Not quite, ma'am," the man replied; "but it will do till I get back to the garage. What the brake needs is a new lining."

She nodded. Then to Wickett: "Hop in."

He hesitated only for the briefest moment. He had not forgotten his promise to Molly. He had said that he would try to avoid Mrs. Davenport, and he had tried. He would tell Molly all about it, of course, as soon as he got home. She could n't blame him for this chance encounter, surely; and as for riding back to the city with Mrs. Davenport, short of actual rudeness there was no way out of that.

"Never mind stopping at my house," he said, getting into the machine and seating himself beside her.
"I'll be coming out another day."

She looked at her jeweled wrist watch.

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"If you really don't mind," she said, "that will be better for me. I ought to be home at half-past five — though I am willing to wait for you if necessary."

"Oh, it's quite all right," he said.

"Make the best time you can, Wright," she said to the chauffeur as they started. Then turning again to Shelley: "Of course you know you ought to be shot at sunrise?"

"For what, pray?"

"Deserter!" she said archly.

He began to utter a string of those excuses known to the Manhattanese. He wished to concentrate upon what he was saying, to make his excuses plausible, but the rate at which the chauffeur took the turn from the club drive into the highroad rather threw him off his line. Evidently the man was taking very literally Mrs. Davenport's request for haste.

"This seems to be a very lively little car of yours," he remarked. He did not feel that it would be polite to make the hint more concrete, but hoped she might gather what he meant.

"Yes," she replied, as they began a swift flight up the first long easy grade, "but Wright is a very safe driver."

The remark irritated him slightly. Every one, of

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course, thinks his own chauffeur is a safe driver. He would have liked to tell her that, but refrained.

For a time he sat watching the flying road, driving, so to speak, from the back seat — pressing his feet against the footrest as though operating clutch and brake pedals.

Then, seeing that she noticed this, he explained: “You see I drive a good deal myself. It’s funny what driving does to you. You get a technique of your own — certain ways of getting over bumps, and approaching curves, and passing other cars; and you acquire pretty definite ideas about speed. So you’re always criticizing the other fellow’s driving and thinking just how you’d have done this or that.”

She laid her hand lightly on his arm, saying: “Don’t think about the road. Just think about me.”

He said the obvious thing. “That’s not difficult to do!” he told her.

But it was difficult, all the same, at such a speed. No chauffeur had any right, he felt, to drive as fast as this upon the Post Road. There were too many other cars; too many crossings. Nor was it only the speed that was making him uncomfortable. In Mrs. Davenport’s manner and tone there was something confidential — a hint almost of tenderness, or

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of expected tenderness in him — that made him anxious to see the city lights ahead, impatient to be out of her car and home again.

“Will you stop in at my house for a cup of tea before going home?” she asked. “I’d like a nice old-fashioned visit with you.”

They had topped the crest of a little rise and were now shooting swiftly down again. A painted canvas sign, stretched across the road a hundred yards ahead, informed him that the ugly concrete building on the right was the New Economy Garage.

“You’re awfully kind,” he replied. “I’d love to, but I can’t — not to-day. You see, the fact is ——”

It was not a fact, at all, that he was going to tell her; but whatever it was that he had meant to say, the sentence was never completed. For suddenly without warning he saw a heavy motor truck back out of the garage and stop directly across the road in front of them. Seeing them descending on him, the driver made to get out of the way again, but evidently stalled his motor. The truck gave a little jump and stood still. Their own chauffeur snatched for the emergency-brake lever. The car swerved sharply as the brakes bit upon the wheels. But the

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distance was too short. They must inevitably strike the heavy vehicle with great force.

"Look out for glass!" Shelley shouted, throwing an arm over her face and leaning to shield her with his body. Then in the brief electric interval of waiting a flood of thoughts went surging through his mind.

That a collision at this pace meant death he hardly doubted. But, curiously, death seemed just then a matter comparatively unimportant. The important thing, the ghastly thing, was that death should catch him in such a predicament — such an undeserved predicament — giving him no chance to explain. He had avoided going shopping with Molly. He had told her he was going out to the house. She would learn that he had not been there. It would appear to her that he had been deliberately deceitful; that when he had refused to go shopping he was already planning a clandestine meeting with Mrs. Davenport; that the final act of his life had been to lie to her. It was outrageous! Outrageous that when a man was playing straight, coincidence should place him in an evil light and then kill him, leaving his memory forever black in the eyes of the gentlest, sweetest, truest of wives!

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Ah! Was it true that a soul leaving a body could carry a message? Then his soul departing must carry a last word to Molly. Before going on its final journey it must seek her out and implore her to believe. It must do that! It must!

And now like a response to his tortured prayer he felt a rending, as of the spirit casting off the bondage of the flesh; then an exquisite sensation of swift soaring, upward and away. It had happened, then! His soul was free. Down there in the world, somewhere, his body was lying beside a road. It meant nothing to him. It was a worn-out overcoat he had discarded — that was all. Hitherto it had hampered and held down this flying, vaporous intelligence which was the essence of his being. But he had cast it off, and now the great adventure had begun. Where it would end he could not tell. He was aware only of the immediate destination toward which he was sweeping, swift as light. He was on his way to Molly. He was approaching her. Now he could see her, waiting.

“Believe!” he cried to her in a voice that echoed to the dome of heaven. “Believe, dear! Oh, believe!”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RECOVERY

THROUGH the reaches of celestial night there came to him the reverberations of a gong, loud and clattering, yet very far away. Simultaneously his flight became less smooth and swift. The atmosphere seemed to be disturbed. He felt his spirit plunging like a boat driving into heavy head seas. His progress lessened. There came the feeling of a slow lateral drift; then of easy bumping, as though he had become a vessel and were riding the sand bar of the Milky Way. Then in the darkness he was still. He had come to anchor somewhere.

But where was Molly now? If, while he had soared illimitable space, æons had passed — or even mere centuries of time — she was of course no longer living on the old earth. Her soul, too, must have taken flight. She must be here somewhere; or in some kindred realm where finer spirits dwell, betweenwhiles.

Ah, if only she were indeed in this place! If only

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he might meet her, take her hand and be her mate once more! If only he might have another chance! Just one more chance with Molly! How different things would be! How happy he would make her!

In agony he prayed that he might have her back again. Not that he deserved her. Far from it! Measured by the record of his last life in the world his deserts were of the smallest. He had been guilty of a series of egregious follies. True, he had always loved Molly, but that was not enough. One must deserve. It was not justice that he craved of the divine tribunal — only mercy.

A great terror came over him. Somehow without seeing, without definitely hearing, without being able to move or speak, he felt that he was being tried. Unintelligible sounds filled the air. He, the prisoner, was lying on his back helpless, and being roughly handled. His arm was being twisted. They would break it if they turned it any more. The pain was hideous. He wished to shriek, but could not make a sound.

Strangely the courtroom seemed to be within his own mind, his own intelligence. And because the trial was going on within him he knew everything about it, even though no word was spoken. The

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case was that of his own worthiness. Was he fit for a step up in the great scheme of progressive living? Was he fit to go on — with Molly?

Out of the vagueness witnesses appeared. All of them were women. He knew them all, and they knew him. For with each he had philandered. One after another they nodded toward him without speaking, as though to say, "Yes, that is he;" and as this silent evidence piled up against him he felt hope sinking, sinking, sinking.

Last of the spectral figures came Mrs. Davenport, attired as Diana. And she, instead of merely recognizing him, began to fit an arrow to her bow. She raised the bow, took aim. The arrow was for him. He was seized by an ague of terror. The courtroom trembled, tottered, then seemed to explode, its fragments flying off like flaming meteors.

And now once more he found himself swiftly traversing great black spaces, impelled by an awful, inexorable, unknown force. This time, however, the sensation was that of falling. He was a lost soul.

As he dived down and down, turning over, righting himself, turning over again, like a body pitched from the cornice of a skyscraper, he found his voice and uttered a despairing cry:

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"Molly! Molly! Oh, Molly!"

And then, while the sound of that wail still echoed in his ears, he heard — oh, wonder of wonders! — the voice of Molly close beside him, and felt a hand seize his.

"Yes, Shelley. I am here."

"Is it really you?"

"Yes, dear." He felt the reassuring pressure of her hand. "Everything is all right. Just rest quietly."

He wished to clutch her hand with both of his, but his other hand would not move.

"Don't let go! Don't leave me!"

"I won't. Don't worry, dear. I'll stay right here."

Now he was no longer plunging downward through the dark. At her touch the hideous flight had been arrested. No doubt she was a power, up here. Hand in hand they were floating easily along. Peace filled his heart.

"How did you get here?" he managed to ask her.

"Of course I came as soon as I heard."

Of course! How like her!

"Was it far to come?" he murmured.

"It seemed far," she said softly.

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He wept for happiness.

"We're going to begin all over again," he told her. "They've given me another chance. You're going to be happy, dear."

"I am happy — just to be here with you."

He pressed her hand again.

"God is merciful!" he said.

"Yes, dear, He is. Now try to rest."

Still clinging to her hand he slept.

Next day he was able to hear all about it. His arm was fractured, his body bruised and his scalp had been cut by glass. Mrs. Davenport had fared better, escaping with hardly more than a severe shaking up. The chauffeur had been thrown against the steering wheel and had several broken ribs.

"It's a miracle," he said, "that nobody was killed."

"Yes," Molly replied. "Mrs. Davenport feels that she owes her escape, perhaps even her life, to you."

The subject did not seem to interest him.

"You know we met by accident out there?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes. She told me."

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"I could n't very well get out of riding in with her, Molly."

"Of course you could n't, dear." Then she added: "She wants to come and see you as soon as you feel well enough."

Two or three days later, when Molly had left to see about his broth, the floor nurse entered his neat little cream-painted room, saying: "A visitor to see you, Mr. Wickett."

Simultaneously he heard voices in the corridor outside. He recognized the voices. One was Molly's. One was that of the fashionable surgeon in whose care he was. The third was Mrs. Davenport's.

He heard Molly greet the sumptuous lady and introduce the surgeon to her. Then he heard the latter say in his most ingratiating manner: "I recognized Mrs. Davenport at once. I've often seen her, though we never met before."

"Oh, I've known you by sight for a long time, doctor," Mrs. Davenport replied in a tone that made Wickett think of dripping sirup.

Molly, entering the room, left them to continue their conversation outside.

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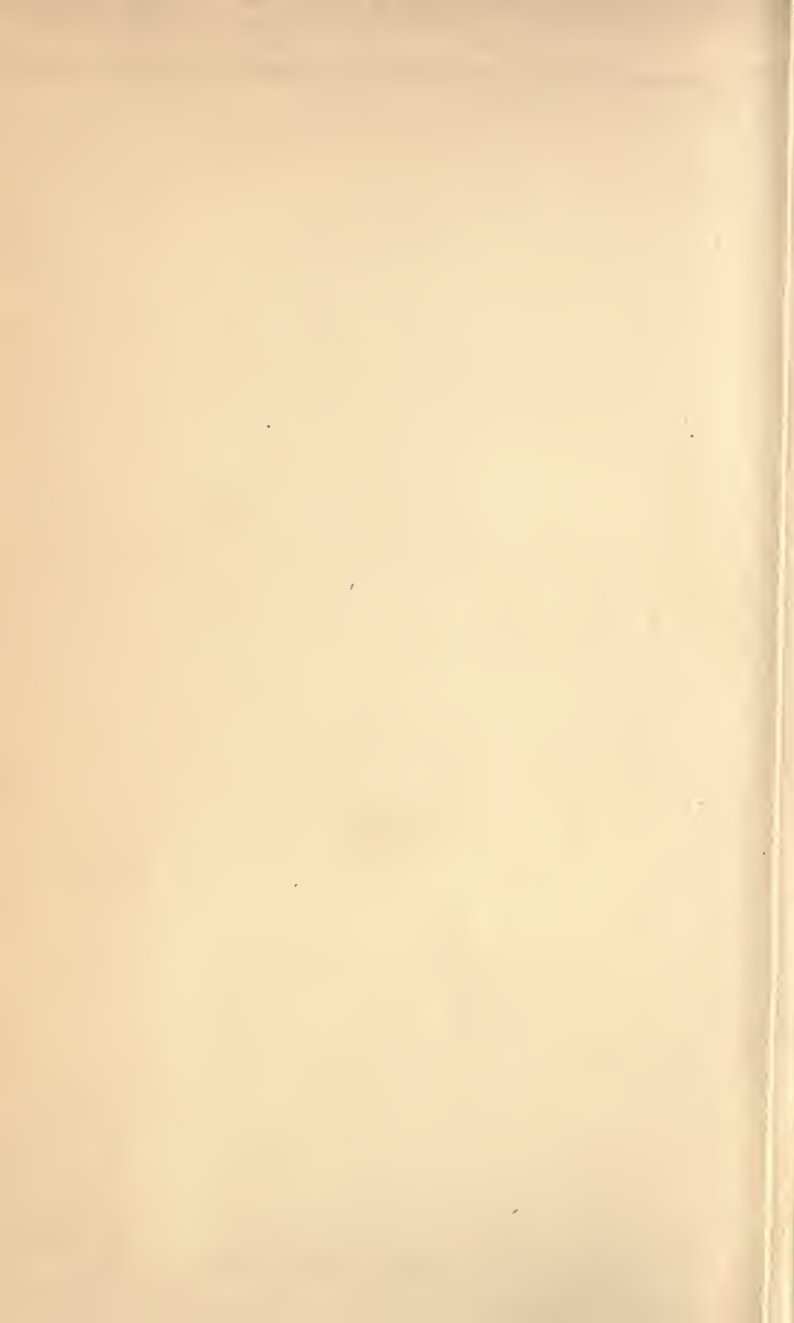
“I’m flattered indeed!” Wickett heard the surgeon answer. “The more so since you seem never to see any one.”

“Ah, but I do, though!” came her voice. “For ages I’ve had a name of my own for you. To myself I always call you ‘the man that wears such pretty scarfs.’”

Wickett closed his eyes.

“Molly,” he said hurriedly, “I don’t feel well enough for visitors to-day.”

THE END



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